V. MEDVEDEV

BE A MAN, BARANKIN

36 AMAZING EVENTS FROM THE LIFE OF YURI BARANKIN

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TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN
BY *BERNARD ISAACS*

DESIGNED BY *L. LAMM*

DRAWINGS BY *G. VALK*

ВАЛЕРИЙ МЕДВЕДЕВ

**36 УДИВИТЕЛЬНЫХ СОБЫТИЙ
ИЗ ЖИЗНИ ЮРИЯ БАРАНКИНА**

На английском языке

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PART ONE

BARANKIN TO THE BLACKBOARD!

EVENT ONE

TWO BAD MARKS

If it wasn't for the bad marks Kostya Malinin and I got for geometry at the very beginning of the school year, nothing miraculous and fantastic would ever have occurred in our lives. But we did get bad marks, and so the next day something absolutely miraculous and fantastic, I should even say, supernatural, happened to us.

During playtime, soon after the wretched event, that girl Zina Fokina, our class monitor, came up to us and said: "Oh, Barankin, Malinin, how can you! Oh, what a shame! You've disgraced the whole school!" Then she collected the girls around her, and they all went into a huddle. From what I could see, they were hatching a plot against me and Kostya. This pow-wow went on all through the interval until the bell rang for the next lesson.

Meanwhile, Alik Novikov, our wall newspaper's photographer and special reporter, had taken pictures of me and Kostya, and with the headline, "Dunces run in pairs", had slapped them into the newspaper in the "Humour and Satire" column.

After that Era Kuzyakina, the newspaper's editor-in-chief, gave us a dirty look and hissed, "Ugh, you! Fancy spoiling such a newspaper!"

It did look nice, that newspaper Kuzyakina had accused me and Kostya of spoiling. It was all painted up in different colours, and right across it, in bright paint, ran the motto: "Our only marks must be 'good' and 'excellent'!"

As a matter of fact, our sullen faces, which had "dunce" written all over them, somehow didn't go with that bright jolly-looking newspaper. I couldn't help sending Kuzyakina a note, in which I wrote:

"Kuzyakina! What about taking our photos out, so's to make the newspaper look nice again."

Under the word "nice" I drew two heavy lines, but Era just shrugged her shoulder and didn't so much as glance in my direction.

EVENT TWO

THEY DON'T GIVE A FELLOW A CHANCE

As soon as the last bell rang, all the pupils made a dash for the door. I was just about to push it open with my shoulder when Era Kuzyakina got between it and me.

"Don't go away! Don't go away! We're going to hold a general meeting," she cried, adding spitefully: "To discuss Barankin and Malinin."

"It isn't a meeting at all!" shouted Zina Fokina. "Just a talk. A serious talk. Get back to your places!"

That started it. Were they all furious! They began to slam desk tops, scolded me and Kostya and shouted that they were not going to stay behind for anything. Kostya and I, of course, shouted louder than anyone else. Whoever heard of such a thing! As soon as a fellow gets a bad mark they go and hold a general meeting—well, if not exactly a meeting, then a "serious talk". One's as bad as the other. We had nothing like this last year. I mean, Kostya and I got bad marks last year too, but no one made such a fuss about it. We were overhauled, of course, but not like this, not right away. They gave a fellow a chance to collect himself, as the saying goes. While these thoughts were passing through my mind, our class monitor Fokina and our editor-in-chief Kuzyakina succeeded in putting

down the "revolt". They made everybody return to his place. When the noise gradually died down and comparative quiet was restored in the class-room, that girl Fokina lost no time starting the meeting—I mean the "serious talk" devoted to me and to my best pal Kostya Malinin.

Naturally, I don't like recalling all the things Zina Fokina and our other class-mates said about us at that meeting, but nevertheless I shall describe everything exactly the way it happened without twisting a single word or adding anything of my own.

EVENT THREE

JUST LIKE IN OPERA

When everybody was seated and quiet restored in the class-room, Zina Fokina up and shouts:

"It's a shame, I say! It's simply a scandal! No sooner do we start the new school year than Barankin and Malinin go and get bad marks!"

A terrific uproar broke out again in the class-room. Nevertheless you could make out a phrase here and there amid the general din.

"If that's the case, you can count me out as editor-in-chief of the wall newspaper!" (This from Era Kuzyakina.)

"Mind you, they gave their word that they would do better!" (Misha Yakovlev.)

"The miserable drones! We messed about with them all last year and now it's starting all over again!" (Alik Novikov.)

"We'll have to talk to their parents!" (Nina Semyonova.)

"They're a disgrace to the class!" (Irina Pukhova.)

"We all decided to get only 'good' and 'excellent' marks, and now this is what we have!" (Ella Sinitsina.)

"Shame on Barankin and Malinin!" (Nina and Irina together.)

"They ought to be kicked out of the school!" (Era Kuzyakina.)

"You wait, Era, you'll be sorry for those words."

At this they all started shouting together again, and this time Kostya and I could no longer make out what this or that pupil was thinking about us. From a word caught here and there, though, we could gather that Kostya and I were chuckle-heads and dunces, spivs and drones. Then again dunces, lazy-bones and egoists. Etc., etc. And so on and so forth.

What got our goat, though, was the fact that Venka Smirnov was yelling louder than anyone else. Those who live in glass houses should not throw

stones. Last year this Venka got worse marks than we did. This was more than I could stand, so I started shouting too.

"You should be the last to shout, ginger!" I let go at Venka Smirnov. "If you'd been called to the blackboard first you'd have got worse marks than we did. I'd pipe down if I were you."

"Don't be silly, Barankin, I'm on your side, not against you," Venka yelled back at me. "Listen here a minute, you chaps. Dash it all, you can't call a fellow to the blackboard right away like that, soon after the holidays. We've got to come to ourselves first after the holidays. . . ."

"Smirnov!" Zina Fokina yelled at Venka.

"And generally speaking," Venka continued, shouting at the top of his voice, "I propose that no one should be asked any questions or called to the blackboard during the first month."

"Shout that out louder, so's the others can hear!" I cried to Venka.

At this everyone began shouting together again, this time so loudly that you couldn't make out a single word.

"Oh, quiet, please!" said Fokina. "Shut up! Let Barankin speak."

"What's the use of speaking?" I said. "It's not our fault that Kostya and I were the first to be called to the blackboard this school year. Why didn't the teacher call out one of the topnotchers first, Misha Yakovlev, say. Then we'd have started with excellent marks."

Everyone began to laugh, and Fokina said:

"Instead of trying to be funny, Barankin, you'd better take an example from Misha Yakovlev."

"I'll take no egg sample from an egg-head," I said half to myself, but loud enough to be heard.

The boys and girls began laughing again. Zina Fokina started ohing and ahing, and Era shook her head like a grown-up and said:

"Barankin! Better tell us when you and Malinin intend to improve your marks."

"Malinin," I said to Kostya, "tell 'em."

"What are you all shouting for!" said Malinin. "We'll improve them."

"When?"

"Yura, when shall we improve them?"

"Haven't you got a head of your own on your shoulders?" Kuzyakina shouted at Malinin.

"We'll do better before the next holidays," I said in a firm voice that left no room for doubt.

"Listen to them! Before the next holidays! Have we got to put up with these bad marks all that time!"

"Barankin!" that girl Fokina said. "The class has decided that you've got to improve your marks tomorrow."

"Sorry, but tomorrow's Sunday," I snapped.

"Never mind, a bit of school work will do you good!" (Misha Yakovlev.)

"Serves 'em right!" (Alik Novikov.)

"Let's tie them down to their desks with ropes!" (Era Kuzyakina.)

"And what if Kostya and I don't know how to do the sum?" (This was me.)

"I'll explain it to you!" (Misha Yakovlev.)

Kostya and I looked at each other but said nothing.

"Silence means consent," Zina Fokina said. "So that's settled then. We've agreed on Sunday. In the morning you'll have your lesson with Yakovlev, and afterwards you'll come down to the school garden. We're going to plant trees."

"What?" Kostya and I yelled in one voice. "We're to plant trees too? Why, we . . . we'll be fagged out after the lesson!"

"Manual labour is the best form of relaxation after mental work," said our editor-in-chief.

"What do you call this!" I said. "It's like what they sing in the opera: 'No sleep, no peace for my tormented soul!' "

"Alik," said our class monitor, "see that they don't run away."

"They won't run away," Alik said. "Not from me. Now then, look cheerful, please! I waste no words. In case of anything"—Alik trained his camera on us—"click, and I slap a picture into the newspaper."

EVENT FOUR
(Very Important)
AND WHAT IF I AM TIRED OF BEING A MAN?

The class-room emptied, but Kostya and I sat on at the desk in silence. Frankly, we were both flabbergasted, so to speak. I already mentioned that we happened to get bad marks before this, but never had our class-mates taken us so severely to task at the very beginning of the school year as they had this Saturday.

I thought Kostya and I were the only ones left in the room, and was just about to unburden my mind to him when suddenly that girl Fokina sidled up to me.

"Yura," Zina Fokina said. (Funny! She always used to call me by my surname.) "Be a man, Yura! Make up for your bad marks tomorrow. You will, now won't you?"

She spoke to me as if we were all alone in the class-room. As if Kostya Malinin, my best friend, were not sitting there beside me.

"You will, won't you?" she repeated softly.

"Fokina!" I said in a cold official tone. "If I were a rude person I'd tell you: 'Don't be a bloomin' nuisance!' "

Fokina (*indignantly*): It's simply impossible to speak to you in ordinary human language!

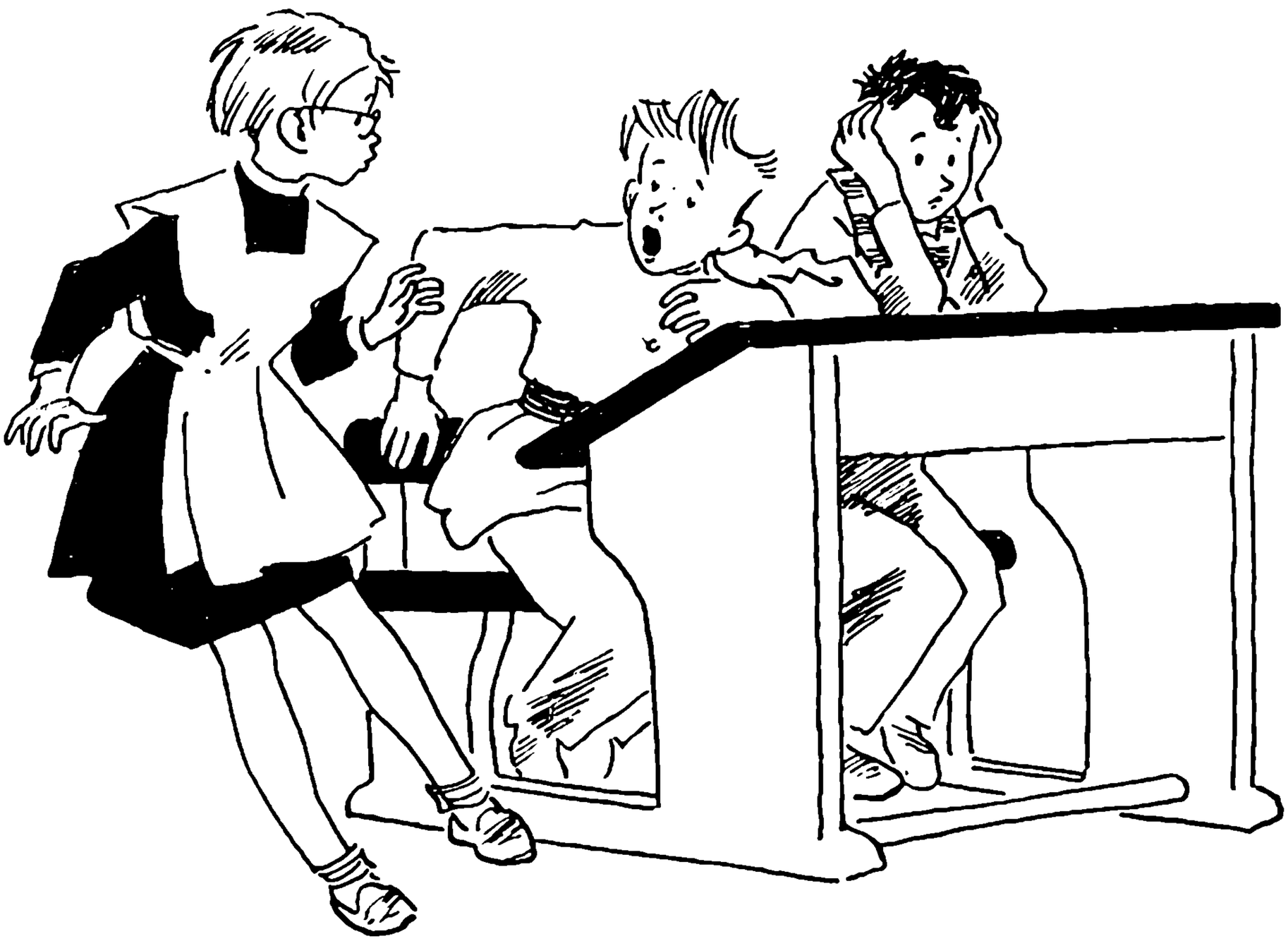
I (*coolly*): Well, don't then.

Fokina (*still more indignantly*): I won't.

I (*still more coolly*): But you are.

Fokina (*a thousand times more indignantly*): It's because I want you to be a human being, a man!

"And what if I'm tired of being a man!" I shouted angrily at Fokina.



"Faugh, Barankin! Ugh, Barankin! You're the limit, Barankin!" said Fokina, and walked out of the room.

And I was left sitting at the desk in brooding silence, thinking how tired I really was of being a man, a human being. I was tired already, yet before me was a whole human life to be lived and a hard school year to be faced. And tomorrow, too, was such a cheerless Sunday.

EVENT FIVE

WE'RE GIVEN SPADES AFTER ALL.... AND MISHA MAY TURN UP AT ANY MOMENT

And now came Sunday. On Daddy's calendar the letters and figure are coloured a festive red. For all the children in our house this day is a holiday. Some of them are going to the pictures, some to a football match, while others are going about their various business. But Kostya and I are sitting out in the yard, warming a bench, waiting for Misha Yakovlev to come and help us do our lesson.

It isn't much fun doing your school work on an ordinary week-day, leave alone on Sunday, when everyone has the day off. It's simply cruel. And as if on purpose, the weather was fine. Not a cloud in the sky, and the sun was shining brightly. It was as warm as in summer.

When I woke up in the morning and looked out into the street, the sky was cloudy. The wind was whistling outside my window and tearing yellow leaves off the trees.

I was glad. Hail would start coming down in a minute, I said to myself, hail the size of a dove's egg. Misha would be afraid to come out, and we'd be free of school work for the day. If not hail, then maybe a snow-storm would blow up or it would start raining. But rain or snow wouldn't stop Misha, he was not that kind. At least, it wouldn't be so trying to pore over textbooks in such dirty weather. While I was making up all kinds of plans in my head, things worked out the other way round. The clouds thinned and then melted away altogether. By the time Kostya Malinin arrived the weather had cleared up and the sun was shining outside in the bluest of skies. There wasn't so much as a capful of wind either. Even the yellow leaves stopped falling from the birch-tree under which Kostya and I were sitting.

"Hi, you twin mushrooms there!" Mamma's voice came from the window of our flat. "Are you going to do your lesson or not?"

This was the fifth or sixth time she had asked us that question.

"We're waiting for Yakovlev."

"Can't you start without him?"

"We can't," Kostya and I said together, and turning away from the window we started to look through the acacia bushes at the garden gate, whence Misha was to appear.

But there was no sign of Misha. Instead, Alik Novikov prowled about outside the gate, every now and then taking the lay of the land from behind a tree. As usual, he was hung about with cameras and all kinds of photographic gadgets. I couldn't bear the sight of that spying sneak, and turned my eyes away.

"This is called Sunday!" I said bitterly.

Just then that girl Fokina came up to Alik. She was carrying four spades. Under her arm was a cardboard box, and in her left hand a butterfly-net.

Alik took a photograph of Zina with the spades on her shoulder, and then both of them approached us. I thought Alik would take the spades from her and shoulder them himself, but he didn't. Zina continued to stagger along with all four spades while Alik continued to use both hands to support the camera which hung from his neck.

"Hi, Your Photographic Lordship," I said to Alik when he and Zina came up to the bench. "Those spades don't fit your shoulder, I see."

"But they'll fit yours and Kostya's to a T," Alik said, cool as you like, the while he trained his camera on Kostya and me. "Caption: class monitor Z. Fokina hands implements to her fellow-countrymen."

Zina Fokina leaned the spades against the bench and Alik took one more snapshot.

"Yes," I said, staring at the spades. "Reminds me of that picture puzzle I saw in *Kostyor** the other day."

"What's that?" Fokina asked suspiciously.

"A picture puzzle," I said.

"I see," said Alik. "Where's the handle of that spade?"

"No," I said to Alik. "Where's the boy who's going to handle that spade?"

"Barankin!" Zina Fokina said, her voice hardening. "Aren't you going to help plant trees round the school today?"

"Who said I'm not?" I answered. "I'm going to, all right. Only I don't know how long the going will take."

"Be a man, Barankin!" said Zina Fokina. "After you've done your lesson with Misha Yakovlev, come down at once to the school garden."

* *Kostyor* (Campfire)—a Russian magazine for children.—*Tr.*

She was going to say something more to Kostya and me, but changed her mind, turned round and walked off in the direction of the school with a spade on her shoulder.

Alik Novikov took up his post outside the gate behind a tree. Kostya grew more glum than ever and stared at the spades. He looked at them like one hypnotised. I, on the contrary, tried to take no notice of the "implements". I tried my hardest to appear cheerful and began gazing at the trees, little suspecting how soon our yard would become the scene of miraculous, fantastic, I should even say supernatural, events. . . .

EVENT SIX

A WEEKFUL OF SUNDAYS—THAT IS WHAT CAPTURED MY IMAGINATION!

Sparrows twittered loudly in the bushes. They would suddenly dart off the branches in gay companies, flying from tree to tree, the little flocks stretching out and shrinking in mid-air. It looked as if the birds were tied to each other with elastie threads.

A swarm of midges was dancing merrily in front of my nose. Butterflies were fluttering over the flowerbed. Black little ants were running about on the bench on which Kostya and I were sitting. One of them even climbed on to my knee and began basking in the sun.

"I bet you every day's a Sunday with them," I thought, gazing with envy at the sparrows. Staring at the acacia, I began, probably for the two hundred and fiftieth time, comparing my life to theirs and came to a very sad conclusion. A glance was enough to tell you that the birds and all the insects led a carefree life and had a wonderful time: no one was waiting for anybody, no one was learning anything, no one was sent places, no one had to listen to lectures, no one had spades stuck into his hands. Everyone lived his own life and did as he pleased. And so all his life long! Every day a red-letter day. All the time a holiday! Seven days a week and all of them Sundays! And Malinin and I had one day of rest a week, if you can call that a day of rest! It would be fine to live at least one day like these happy creatures lived—these tiny ants, these sparrows or these butterflies. Anything, so long as you didn't have to hear all those verbs that kept raining down on your poor head from morning till night—wake, dress, go, fetch, bring, buy, sweep, help, learn! At school it was no better. The moment I come into the class-room all I hear is that Fokina with her everlasting:

"Oh, Barankin, be a man! Don't fidget, don't crib, don't be rude, don't be late", and so on, and so forth. . . .

In school be a man!
In the street be a man!
At home be a man!
But when can I relax!

Where can I find time for resting? I could manage to carve out a little free time, if it came to that, but where could you find a resting place where no one, absolutely no one, would interfere with your doing just

whatever you liked? And here there came into my mind that incredible idea, which had been hatching itself in secret for ever so long. What if I tried to put it into practice! Put it into practice now, right away! This very minute! A more suitable moment might never come, a more suitable situation and mood might never occur again. First I would have to tell Kostya Malinin about it. Should I, though? Was it worth it? Yes, I will. I'll chance it!

"Malinin," I said in a hot whisper, "I say, Malinin." I was almost choking with excitement.

Of course, if it wasn't for the lessons I had to do that Sunday with work in the school garden on top of it, I would probably never have confided to Kostya my incredible astonishing plan, but the bad mark adorning my report card and the spade leaning its handle against me were the last straw, as they say, and I decided to act.

EVENT SEVEN

THE ONLY INSTRUCTION OF ITS KIND IN THE WORLD

I glanced once more at the windows of our flat, at the sky, at the sparrows, at the gate, from behind which Misha Yakovlev could be expected to appear at any moment, and said in a voice genuinely deep with emotion:

"Kostya! D'you know what my mother says?"

"What does she say?" Kostya said.

"My mother says that if you wish for anything hard enough even a snub nose can turn into an aquiline nose."

"Aquiline?" Kostya Malinin queried blankly and stared at the wall of our house on which somebody had chalked the words:

"BARANKIN IS A CRAZY DREAMER!"

"Yes," I said. "But only if you wish it hard enough."

Malinin tore his eyes away from the wall and looked at my nose doubtfully.

Mine was the exact opposite of an aquiline profile. I had a snub nose. My mother said I was so snubby you could see what was on my mind by looking through the nostrils.

"Then why are you going about with such a nose when you can turn it into an aquiline one?" Kostya Malinin said.

"I'm not talking about noses, silly ass!"

"What then?" Kostya said, still uncomprehending.

"I mean if you really wish hard enough a man could turn, f'r instance, into a sparrow."

"Why should we want f'r instance to turn into sparrows?" Kostya Malinin said, staring at me as if I were dotty.

"Why, we could turn into sparrows and live like decent human beings for one Sunday at least."

"What d'you mean, like human beings?" Malinin said in astonishment.

"I mean real and proper," I explained. "Let's give ourselves a real day off and take a proper rest from all this arithmetic, from Misha Yakovlev and from everything else in the world. Of course, if you're not tired of being a man, then you needn't turn into anything, just sit there and wait for Misha."

"Who said I wasn't tired? I'm dead tired of being a man," said Kostya. "Maybe I'm tireder than you are!"

"Now you're talking!"

And warming to my subject, I began to paint to Kostya Malinin a picture of the gay carefree life that awaited us if we succeeded somehow in turning ourselves into sparrows.

"My, isn't that smashing!" Kostya said.

"You bet!" I said.

"Yes, but how are we going to do the transformation trick? By what system?" Kostya said.

"Haven't you read what they do in the fairy-tales: 'And lo, Ivanushka flung himself upon the ground and turned into a swift-winged eagle. He flung himself upon the ground a second time and turned into . . . .' "

"I say, Yura, couldn't we do without the flinging?" Kostya Malinin interrupted.

"I daresay we could," said I. "We could do it by wishing very hard and using magic words."

"Where are we going to get those magic words? From some old fairy-tale?"

"No. I've thought up the words myself. Here they are." I handed Kostya a copy-book, which nobody in the world except myself had ever set eyes on. "It's all written down there."

" 'How to transform a human being into a sparrow by Barankin's system. Instructions,' " Kostya read out the inscription on the copy-book's cover in a sibilant whisper and turned over the first page.

EVENT EIGHT

"I WILL NOT LEARN, INTO A BIRD I WILL TURN"

"'I will not learn, into a bird I will turn.' What's this—poetry?" said Kostya.

"It isn't poetry, it's magic words," I explained. "That's the way it goes in fairy-tales. You know—fee-fie-fo-fum—that sort of thing."

"'As I am aware sparrows live without a care! Hark the word! Hark,'—I can't make out the rest."

"It's clear as a pikestaff," I said. "'Hark the word, I am turning into a bird!'"

"Not bad!" Kostya said.

"I didn't sleep a wink all night, making that up," I said, and looked round to make sure nobody was spying on us.

"Then what are we wasting precious time for!" cried Malinin. "Let's do it quickly, before Misha Yakovlev comes along."

"You're a funny chap, Malinin! What d'you mean—quickly? It may not work at all for all I know, and there you are crowing away for all the world to hear us."

"So what?"

"What d'you mean so what? This is magic, you know. It hasn't been tried out yet. If anybody overhears us they'll laugh at us afterwards if nothing comes of it."

"But didn't you say that if you had the magic words and if you tried hard enough it was sure to come off?" Kostya whispered.

"Of course it'll come off if you wish hard enough. The trouble is how to wish hard enough," I whispered. "Did you ever wish for anything in your life, Kostya—I mean wish real and strong?"

"I don't know," Kostya said in a low voice.

"There! And you say 'quickly'! This is not turning a low mark into a higher mark for you. It's a question of turning two people into sparrows, my dear chap. That's the problem!"

"Why sparrows? Butterflies are much easier, I should imagine."

"Why butterflies? Butterflies are insects, but a sparrow, after all, is a bird. The last lesson we had was all about sparrows, but you were reading a book on the quiet."

"So I was. I wasn't listening to that lesson about the sparrows."

"But I was. Our teacher was talking sparrows for over an hour. You'd be surprised what a wonderful time they have."

"All right, let it be sparrows then," Kostya agreed. "In our theatrical group I played the part of the crow in 'The Snow Queen', so it'll be easier for me to turn into a sparrow. Be quick!"

"Don't be in such a hurry! We've got to practise a bit first," I said, standing up on the bench.

I squatted on my heels and drew my head in like a bird, with hands behind my back as if they were wings.

"You've got the hang of it," Kostya said, repeating all the motions after me. "Tweet-tweet!"

"Now look here," I said, "if we're going to practise let's practise properly, and don't start chirruping before your time. Let's work out a sparrow's style of walk."

Sitting on our haunches, we started to hop about on the bench and nearly fell off it.

"It's jolly hard work," Kostya said, flapping his arms about like wings to keep his balance.

"Never mind," I comforted him, "when we become real birds this hopping will be much easier."

Kostya was for doing some more hopping, but I told him that practice was over and that we were now passing to the real business—the transformation of the man Malinin and the man Barankin into sparrows.

"Ready!" I commanded.

"Ready," answered Kostya.

"Steady!"

"Steady," Kostya repeated.

"Now concentrate!"

"I've concentrated," answered Kostya.

"And now, when I give the order, start transforming yourself into a sparrow mentally, that's to say, in your imagination. Get me?"

"Yes."

"Now then, ready! Steady! Go!"

I screwed my eyes up tight, got all set, and repeating the magic words to myself, put my mind to work turning into a sparrow, at the same time doubting whether my desire and strength would be equal to such an unheard-of, such an unbelievable, I should even say, supernatural task. . .

PART TWO

TWEET-TWEET! ISN'T LIFE WONDERFUL

EVENT NINE

YOU ONLY HAVE TO WISH HARD ENOUGH, AND...

Truth to tell, all my life long the most fantastic ideas kept coming into my head, and I was always yearning for something that was difficult to attain.

For instance, I once dreamed of inventing an apparatus by means of which you could switch off a person's voice from a distance. According to my calculations, this apparatus (I called it MUTEPHONE YB-1—Voice Silencer, Barankin System) was to work as follows: supposing at today's lesson the teacher was telling us something uninteresting and therefore was preventing me, Barankin, from thinking of something interesting; I switch on the mutephone in my pocket and the teacher's voice disappears. Those who haven't got an apparatus like this go on listening, whereas I calmly go on with what I am doing in complete silence.

Another example. I come into the class-room in the morning. That girl Fokina flies at me and begins to lecture me right away. I calmly switch the thing on in my pocket and Fokina's voice is gone for the rest of the day.

I very much wanted to invent an apparatus like that, but I got no further than the name for it. Maybe because I didn't really wish it hard enough?

Or take last year. On the last day of the summer holidays, just before going to bed, I felt a strong urge to become a grown-up—not in fifteen or twenty years' time, the way all normal people do, but the very next day. You go to bed, say, a kid and wake up a man with whiskers and don't have to go to school any more. I wanted this ever so badly, and even dreamt about it. The next morning, September 1, I woke up earlier, of course, and found myself lying in bed just as I was when I got into it, without whiskers, and I had to go to school.

I had other strong desires, too, but not one of them had ever gripped me real and proper the way this desire of turning myself into a sparrow had.

So when I gave the command "Go!" to Kostya and shut my eyes tight, I made up my mind that I wouldn't open them again until I felt I had become a sparrow.

I was sitting on the bench without stirring, without letting my thoughts wander, I concentrated my mind only on one thing—how to turn into a sparrow as quickly as possible. I looked forward to that moment as I had never looked forward even to the summer holidays. The fact that Misha Yakovlev would turn up at any moment only increased my efforts and intentions tenfold.

At first I sat on the bench just the way ordinary people sit and didn't feel anything special. All kinds of disagreeable human thoughts kept creeping into my head, thoughts about my bad marks, about arithmetic, and about Misha Yakovlev, but I tried to keep my mind off them. I thought that once I was determined to become a sparrow I ought to think only of things that belonged to sparrows. By and by I noticed that unhuman thoughts were beginning to oust the human ones from my mind. For instance, all of a sudden I felt like giving a chirp or two in sparrow language.

On top of these thoughts came all sorts of unhuman desires and intentions. One moment I wanted to hop off the bench and fly about in the air a bit, the next I wanted to perch on the top of the birch-tree, or try living a bit in the nesting-box.

And when, through force of habit, I tried to think of something human again, I was surprised to find that I couldn't do it. Arithmetic struck me as being the silliest of all occupations. The bad marks, for some reason, no longer upset me and didn't seem to matter any more, and I saw Misha Yakovlev not as the school's most famous pupil, but as a clumsy lout who couldn't even do a simple thing like flying about in the air.

And then, all of a sudden, I got the creeps. They started up my legs, and crawled quicker and quicker. Then they ran up my spine, up my arms and all over my body. Suddenly I had a desire to peck oats. Yes! Oats! Raw oats in the husk! Oats lying about on the ground in the dust. Any amount of oats, heaps of them. As much as I could peck my fill of.

There I was, sitting on the bench with my eyes shut, the creeps dashing about all over me like mad, just like the boys at school during the long interval—there I was, sitting and thinking: "I wonder what these creeps

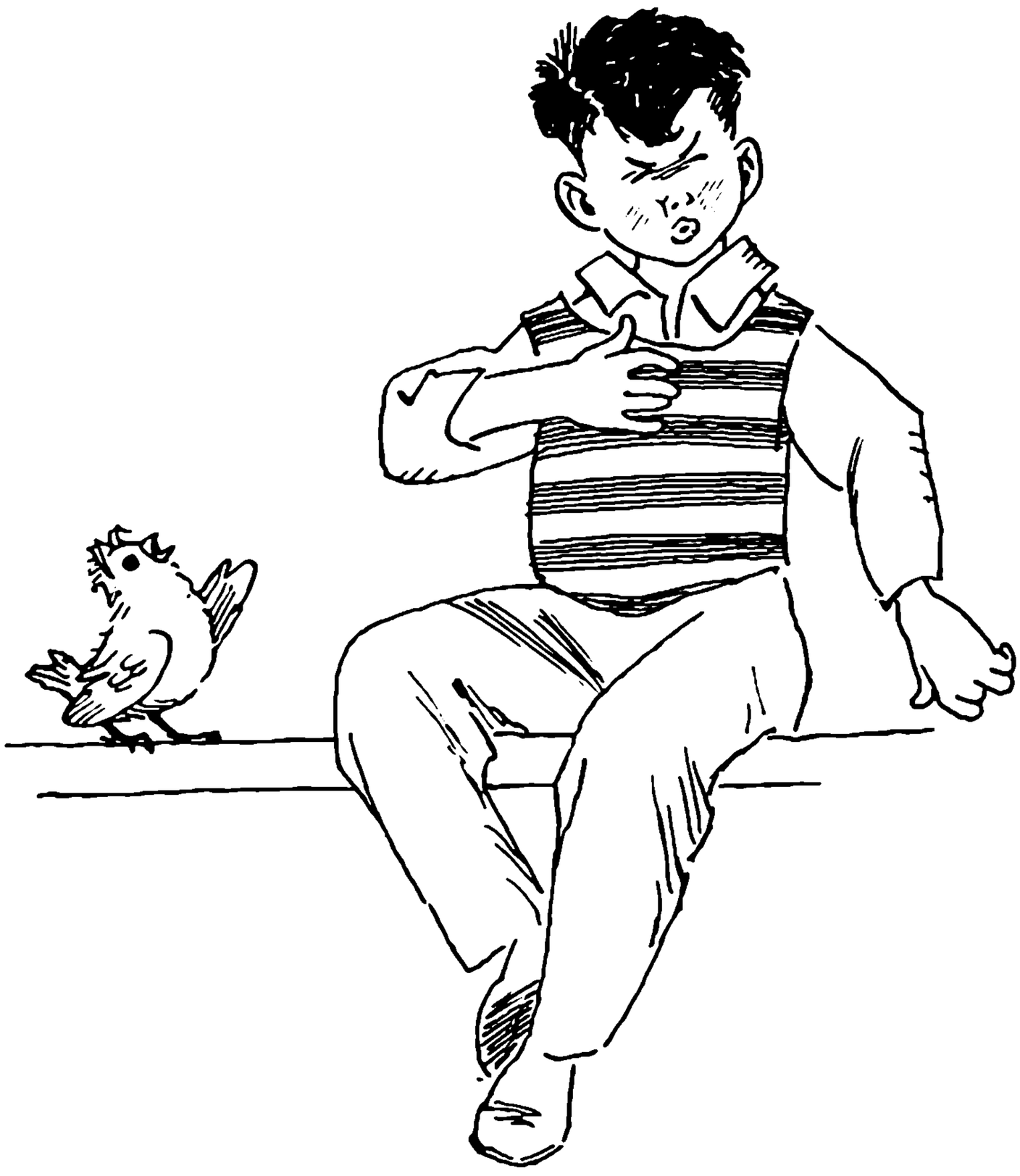
and these oats can mean? I can understand the creeps all right—I must be having pins and needles in my legs—but where do the oats come in?"

Even mamma's oat porridge, which she made with milk and jam, I used to eat without any pleasure. Why should I have a desire for raw oats? Damn it all, I'm a man, not a horse!

I sat there wondering, trying to puzzle the thing out, but I couldn't, because my eyes were shut tight, and everything was dark inside my head on account of it.

So then I thought, "Maybe something has happened to me." And I decided to look myself over from head to foot.

Holding my breath I opened my eyes a little and glanced first at my feet. Would you believe it—instead of feet with boots on them I had the bare feet of a sparrow, and I was standing with those bare bird's feet on the bench just like a real sparrow. I opened my eyes wider and looked



at my arms—instead of arms I had wings. I opened my eyes still wider, twisted my head round and looked behind me—I had a tail there. What's this? It looks as if I have turned into a sparrow after all!

I'm a sparrow! I'm not Barankin any more! I'm a real, honest-to-God, sparrowy sparrow! So that's why I wanted oats all of a sudden—the favourite dish of horses and sparrows! It was all clear now. But not quite, though. It turns out, then, that my mother was right, that if you wished for something hard enough you could get whatever you wanted!

What a discovery!

Such a discovery ought to be chirruped from the house-tops for everyone in the yard to hear. Yard nothing—for the whole town, the whole world to hear!

I spread my wings, I puffed out my chest. I turned towards Kostya Malinin and froze open-beaked.

My friend Kostya Malinin was still sitting on the bench like an ordinary human being. Kostya Malinin had not succeeded in turning himself into a sparrow. Well, I never!

EVENT TEN

WHICH IN SPARROW LANGUAGE MEANS...

Kostya Malinin had not been able to turn himself into a sparrow!

Eyes shut tight, he was puffing away, running his hands over his body and whispering under his nose: "Hark the word, I'm turning into a bird!" —but nothing happened. And he had been in such a hurry, shouting out at the top of his voice: "Let's do it quickly! Hurry up! Let's become sparrows!" And now there he was, as much a Malinin as ever. Only a redder one, as red as a lobster.

"Malinin!" I shouted to Kostya. "What's the matter? Why don't you turn into a sparrow?"

But instead of these words there flew out of my mouth the ordinary twitter of a sparrow: "Tweet-tweet! Cheep-cheep! Peep-peep!"

Kostya turned his head round and stared at me in amazement.

"Barankin!" he said. "Is that you, Barankin?"

"Tweet-a-tweet! Chirrup! Chirrup!" I answered him in sparrow language, and this meant: "Of course it's me! Don't you recognise me?"

Seeing that I wasn't lying and it really wasn't me any more but a real live sparrow, Malinin got still redder in the face—probably through envy —and all but wept.

"How did you do it?" he said, blinking his eyes rapidly.

I said:

"Chee-chee! Twee-twoo-tree! (Quite simple! One, two, three, and there you are!)"

Then the following conversation took place between Kostya and me in different languages:

Kostya (*with tears in his eyes*): So you've done it. Fine! But why doesn't it work with me?

I: Chirp! Peep-cheep! (How do I know!) Chirrup-tweet-twit-tweet! (I don't suppose you wished hard enough.)

Kostya: What are you tweeting at me for? Can't you speak like a human being!

I: R-r-r-r-chik! Tr-r-r-spink-spink-chee! (How can I speak like a human being when I'm a sparrow!) Spink, spank, chuck-chook-chee!

Kostya: You needn't call me names!

I wasn't calling him names at all, I was simply saying: "Never say die, Malinin! Have another try."

Kostya started telling me off because I had turned into a sparrow without waiting for him, but I didn't chirrup anything in reply. I felt rather awkward about it myself. We'd arranged to become sparrows together, and look what happens! Of course, being a sparrow alone wasn't half as much fun as being sparrows together.

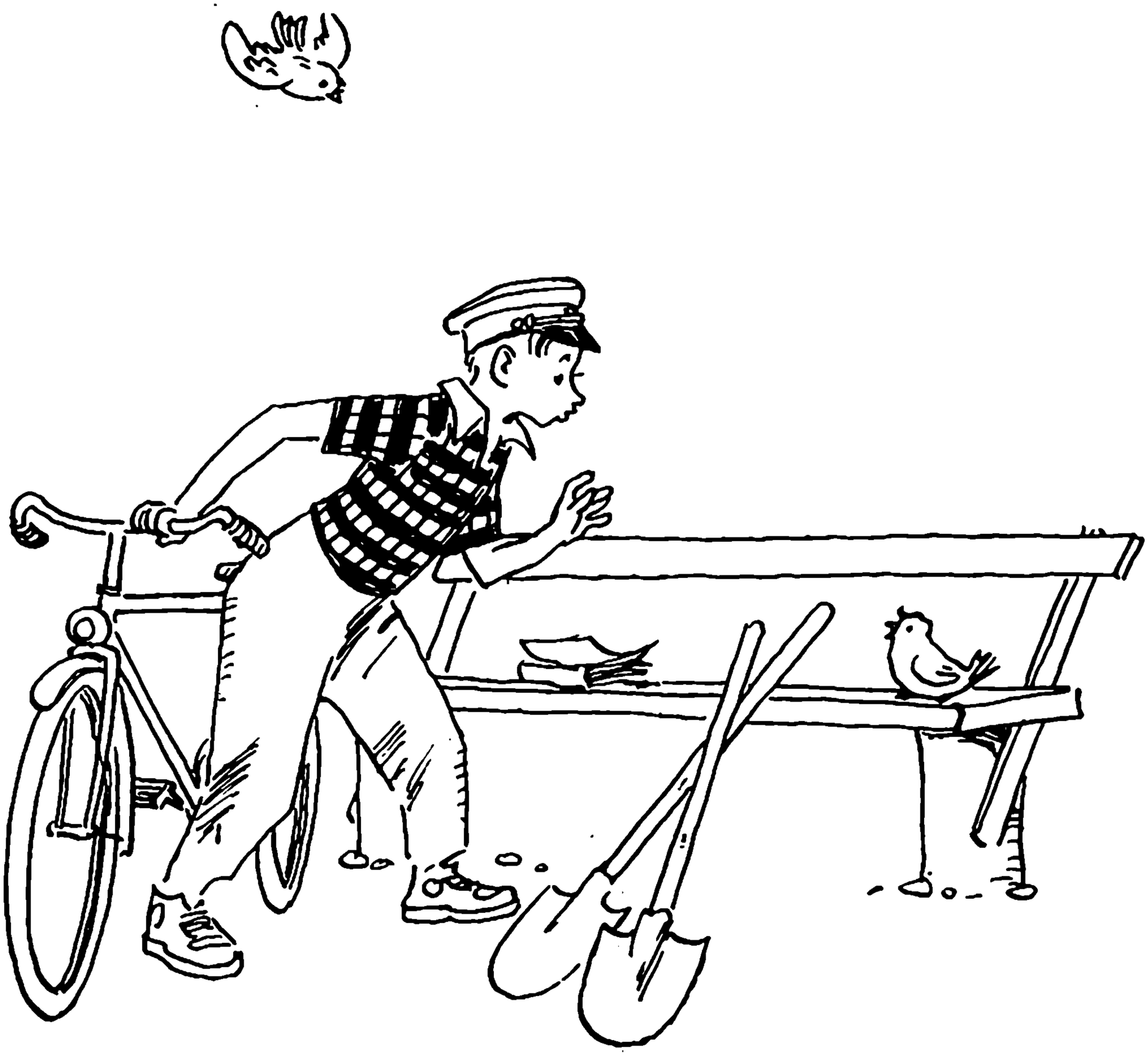
I flapped a wing. Flew up. Perched on the fence, mad as anything, and turned my back on Kostya Malinin. As luck would have it, at that very minute Misha Yakovlev came round the corner of the street on his bicycle. I clutched my head with my wings. All was lost! Malinin would certainly not have time now to turn into a sparrow.

"Hark the word, I'm turning into a bird!" Kostya's voice reached me from below.

Eyes glued on Misha Yakovlev, I shouted down to Kostya Malinin:

"Chim-chim-chim! Cherr-chilim! Cherr-chilim! (Too late! Misha's coming on his bike! He'll take you away to do your lesson!)"

As I was chirping away, I saw Misha ride into the yard and approach the bench on which that poor wretch, Kostya Malinin, was sitting—at least



he should have been sitting there. I say "he should have been" because, when Misha Yakovlev wheeled his bike up to the bench, Kostya was not there any more. In place of Kostya a sparrow stood on the bench on bent legs, and by the looks of it, that sparrow was not a sparrow, but former Kostya Malinin. What happened then, was this. While I had been fretting and beginning to lose faith in everything, Kostya Malinin had turned into a sparrow. He had gone and done it after the second, or maybe, the third attempt. Whatever the attempt, the fact remains that he had become a sparrow.

"Kostya!" Misha shouted. "Malinin! Where are you? That's funny. I just saw him sitting here on the bench. To be sure, I did. Here are his text-books and copy-books."

Misha gathered up the books, and taking no notice of the sparrow (which wasn't a sparrow at all, but Kostya Malinin—what a lark!), he looked all round the yard, then up at our window, from which my mother's head appeared.

"Hullo, Misha!" Mother said. "Where are Yura and Kostya?"

"That's what I was going to ask you," said Yakovlev. "Their schoolbooks and the spades are on the bench, but they're not here."

"The rascals!" Mother said. "They must have run away. Come inside, Misha, they'll soon be back."

Misha put Kostya's schoolbooks on the saddle and disappeared in the doorway. I flew off the fence and joined Kostya Malinin on the bench.

"Irr-chik! Irr-chik! Tweet-twoot-twee! (Good for you, Malinin! You've done the trick after all!)"

To which Kostya chirruped:

"Che-chi-ree? (Have I really?)"

"Choo-twet!" I said. "Chee-chee-chee. (You bet. Open your eyes and have a look.)"

Kostya opened his eyes—they were blue, like a girl's. They hadn't changed colour. A sparrow with blue eyes! Fancy that!

Surprised out of his wits, he stood swaying on his feet, keeping his balance with his tail.

I wiped the perspiration from my brow with my wing and said:

"So that's that! (Ch-oo-ff!)"

"Ch-oo-ff!" said Kostya Malinin, and he, too, wiped his brow with his wing.

We embraced and hopped about for joy on the bench.

EVENT ELEVEN

ENCOUNTER WITH MR. DOCKTAIL

"Now we'll have a slap-up lunch—oats for me," I said to Kostya Malinin. And then we'll flutter off, go on a flying razzle-dazzle!"

"Where to?"

"Oh, anywhere—left, right, choose what you like. Now that we're transformed we can do anything we like." I raised a wing, put one foot back and recited expressively: " 'We are birds of the air! Come, brother, come,

to the gleaming mountain beyond the seas!"* In a word, we are free-free-free to go wherever we plea-plea-please!"

Malinin laughed.

"Yu-ree-ree," he said. "You've turned into a bird all right, but your bill is still snubby. It's too funny for words!"

"You're kidding!"

"I'm not."

"And your eyes have remained blue, just like a girl's, twit-twat, tit-for-tat."

I flew off the bench and alighted by a puddle. I looked into the water. My bill *was* snubby, and altogether I had turned out a mousy-looking kind of bird with feathers sticking out all over the place and a funny tuft on the crest. Kostya Malinin looked quite different. He had a pretty white breast and white tie, and he was neat, tidy, and sleek, as if he had just flown out of a barber's shop.

But I wasn't a bit upset. As a human being I had been no oil painting, either, and was not exactly tidy in my habits. So what if I am snub-nosed, what if I am dishevelled?

That's not the point. The point is that I am a spa-r-row, and no one and nothing now could damp my spirits, that wonderful feeling of being a sparrow. And it was really wonderful, with your head gloriously vacant—free from all cares, thoughts and worries. And all day long like that! The whole blessed day-day-day! What a day-day-day!

I had a drink of rain water and smacked my reflection in the puddle with my wing, splashing water over Kostya Malinin, who was hopping about on the other side.

"Kostya-chok-chok-chok! Well, how's life?"

"Sper-len-did!" chirruped Malinin, splashing water over me too.

"Didn't I tell you? And you said, 'Better let's turn into butterflies.' What about having a dip!"

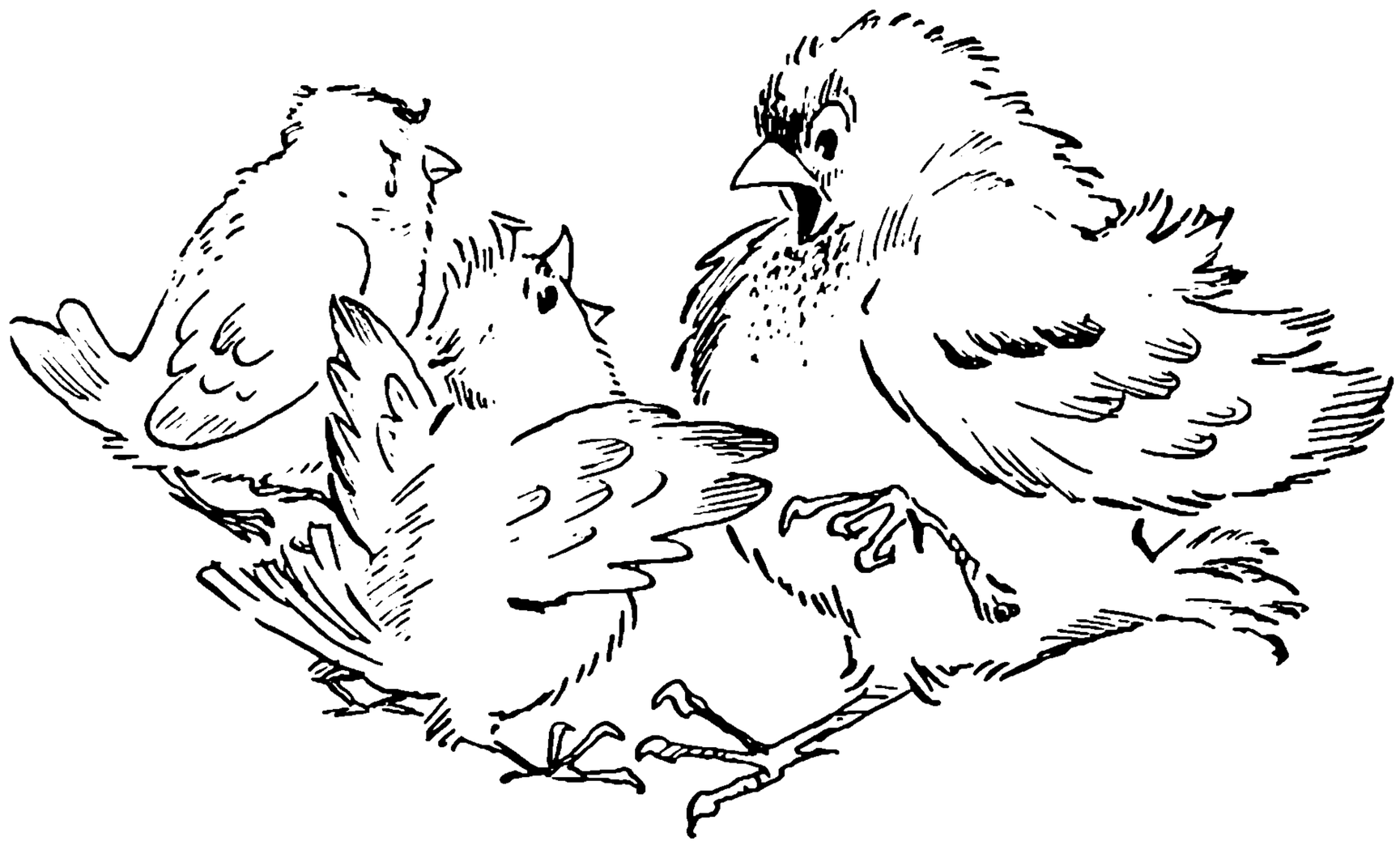
"It's too cold. Let's better look for some oats. I'm terribly hungry."

It was no easy job looking for oats in our yard. I came across some hemp and melon seeds and sunflower seeds, but not oats.

"Here, keep your hands to yourself!" Kostya's voice suddenly came from behind me. "Yu-ree! He's pulled a feather out of my tail, the ruffian!"

I looked round and saw a great big tailless sparrow chasing Kostya Malinin across the grass.

* From Pushkin's poem *The Prisoner.—Ed.*



"I was hopping about," Kostya chittered, skipping up and hiding behind my back, "and came across some oats in the grass. Just as I was bending down, I felt somebody pulling a feather out of my tail! The ruffian!"

"What's the idea, bullying little ones!" I said, hopping up to the lout. "Can't you leave people alone on a holi-day-day?"

"What business had that chippy to come after my oats? I like the chee-chee-cheek, hopping into another fellow's yard and trying to boss the show! I don't remember ever having seen you fellows here, by the way."

I wanted to explain in a nice friendly way why he hadn't been able to see us there before, but the great big bully of a sparrow wouldn't listen to me. He hopped up, and without saying a word, hit me in the chest with his wing, sparrow fashion. He struck his blow, then skipped back and took up a sparring attitude with legs apart and wings spread wide.

I kept a cool head. Fanning out my wings, I suddenly darted in, nose to nose, and gave the fellow a backheel. Just an ordinary human backheel. Of course, this great bully of a sparrow didn't know such tricks, and though he was a full head taller than me, he went down in the grass and took the count. He lay on his back with his legs in the air, all the stuffing taken out of him. He must have been thinking that Kostya and I were going to pitch into him now that he was down and give him a jolly good hiding. But somehow I felt sorry for that sparrow.

"Hi, you, Docktail!" I said. "Get up. We don't hit a man when he's down. Hop it! Wait a minute, though—you can stay. We'll treat you to some oats in a minute. Where are the oats, Kostya?"

"Here in the grass. Here's an oat-oat-oatie! Here's another oat-oatie."

But the tailless one paid no heed to my words. He picked himself up without a word, shook himself and hopped off, looking pretty scared.

"Coward!" Malinin shouted after him with a whisk of his tail.

"What about yourself!" I said to Kostya, grasping a golden grain with my foot. "Couldn't you stand up to him yourself?"

I was in a good humour again. Kostya, too, was as jolly as can be.

"You gave him what for, all right!" Kostya said, digging an oat grain out of the grass.

My mouth had begun to water at the mere sight of the delicious grains. I stropped my beak on a stone and gripped the oat grain still harder with my foot. In another moment I'd peck that grain to bits and swallow them.

"Cat!" I heard Kostya Malinin's frantic voice behind me.

I turned round. . . .

EVENT TWELVE

MOOSKA THE CAT WANTS TO EAT ME UP

And so I turned round. Kostya Malinin was no longer on the ground, but up in a tree. He had hooked himself on to a branch, and was hanging head down, flapping his wings and screaming like mad:

"Cat! Behind you, cat!"

I turned my head the other way. A cat was approaching me from the dustbin shed, just an ordinary cat as cats go. Only I couldn't make out why that should scare anyone and why Kostya should get so panicky, as if a tiger had come walking into the yard. That fellow Malinin was plumb nutty, he was! If I'd known he was going to be such a nervy sparrow I wouldn't have had anything to do with him.

"Yu-ree! Fly away, quick!" Kostya Malinin cried, dancing about on the branch.

The cat came closer and stopped. It was then that I recognised her. It was Mother's pet cat Mooska. When I was sitting on the bench, still in human shape, she had jumped off the window-sill and come up to me, rubbing against my leg, and I had shooed her away because she interfered with my thoughts.

"Hullo, Mooska!" I chirped. Don't you recognise your master. Come

on, don't be afraid, I won't eat you up. It's me. You funny pussy, you! And that one up there in the tree is Kostya Malinin. Don't you recognise him either? Fly down here, Kostya, don't be afraid. It's only our Mooska."

"You're crazy!" Malinin began chittering again. "She'll eat you up!"

"Who, me? Her master? You're the one who's crazy! You've gone crackers, Malinin!"

I had scarcely finished the sentence when a heavy, snarling body fell on top of me. "Mooska!" flashed through my mind, and I made a wild dash for the acacia in which Kostya Malinin was chattering and twittering away for all he was worth. I whizzed upward like a stone from a slingshot, and nearly knocked my best friend off his perch. Luckily he kept his foothold on the branch of the tree. I looked down from the branch. Mooska was lashing her tail over the grass and licking her chops.

Little feathers which Mooska had torn from my side were floating about in the air like fishes in an aquarium.

"Serves you right, tweet, twite!" Kostya Malinin went on chittering, this time spitefully.

"I can't understand it," I twittered. "Such a familiar cat. One of the family, you might say."

"Familiar! Family! Thank your stars you got away with a whole skin."

"Barankin has never given in to cats!"

"Brave fellow, aren't you! You've got a lot to twitter for yourself! 'Come on, I won't eat you up, you funny pussy!' Funny pussy yourself! Have you forgotten that cats eat sparrows?"

"No," I answered, "I simply can't get used to the idea of being a sparrow."

" 'Can't get used to the idea!' I got used to it quick enough," Kostya said, and added: "What would your mother say if that Mooska of yours had eaten you up?"

I tried to imagine for a moment what would have happened if I had not managed to slip through Mooska's clutches in time. The thought made me go all goosey. In fact, I was really frightened, although the danger was over and there was nothing to be frightened about any more. All the same the feathers stood up on me at the thought.

"What's the matter with you?" Kostya Malinin asked me.

"Nothing. I feel hot," I said, fanning myself with my wing.

Kostya started scolding me again, so I stuck my head under my wing to shut it out. At that very moment I felt a sharp jab in the side. . . .

EVENT THIRTEEN

WHAT THE GRANDMAS TWITTER ABOUT

I looked out from under my wing and saw a mouldy-looking old fig of a sparrow sitting beside me.

"Here, you yellow-beaked chippy, you," the old fellow said to me. "I've been watching you all the time from that birch-tree over there. What are you, a nitwit-twit-twit, or are you just pretending?"

"What do you want of me?"

"Don't be rude to your elders."

"I'm not being rude. I've got a hoarse voice."

To shake off the old geezer, I stuck my head under my wing again, but he gave me another painful jab in the neck.

"Listen when your elders speak to you. Respect your elders. Ree-spec-pec-pect. Don't be chee-chee-cheeky!"

"I'm not being chee-cheeky."

"What was that about cats you were tweeting? How can a sparrow have cat acquaintances? Oh, you chip-chip-chippy! I don't know what your parents are thinking of!"

The old chap rolled up his eyes and began twittering about how diligent and obedient the young sparrows were in his day, how clever they all were, and how cheeky this new young generation was.

Fancy transforming yourself into a sparrow only to listen to this boring lec-ture-ture-ture! When the old women in our yard get together of an evening on the garden bench, that's all they chirrup about—I mean, talk about.

"Whose chi-chi-children are you?" the old chap asked.

"Nobody's chi-chi-children! Nobody's!" I said and flew off the branch, with Kostya Malinin following me.

"Chee-chee-cheeky! Don't be chee-chee-cheeky!" Kostya said, working away with his wings. "The old bird's got a screw loose, if you ask me."

We circled over our yard, looking for a tree that wasn't occupied by sparrows. Although I was a sparrow myself, I somehow didn't feel like seeking their company. I had not been exactly impressed by my acquaintance with the tailless one and the moudly old fig. What worried me most of all, however, was the fact that although half an hour had passed since Kostya and I had turned into sparrows, we had not yet been able to make a go of it in this sparrow life. Things were not falling out the way I thought they would. Time was passing. . . . Tomorrow, by the way, we had to be back at school.

I didn't say anything to Kostya Malinin, of course. After all, we had the whole day before us—life would settle down, everything would come right. The thing was not to give way to despair, not to lose hope.

After circling around a bit Kostya and I alighted on a tree that was not occupied by sparrows.

The branch we perched on was on the sunny side, and the sun was almost as hot as in summer.

I drew my head into my shoulders with pleasure and was about to hide it under my wing when all of a sudden something whizzed past my ear. There was a loud plop behind me, then a spatter of falling leaves. What the devil is this now? I opened my eyes and looked down.

EVENT FOURTEEN

A LONG-RANGE SLINGSHOT WITH A TELESCOPIC SIGHT

Next to the bench on which Kostya and I had been sitting only a few minutes ago, there stood our neighbour's boy, tow-headed Venka Smirnov, with one eye screwed up in the most sinister manner. In his hand was a slingshot with a telescopic sight. I recognised the thing immediately. It

was my own handiwork. Nobody could make such long-range slingshots as good as I could. I had made this one for Venka at his personal request.

Venka was looking at me through the telescopic sight. I was looking at Venka. On Venka's face was written: "A miss! What a pity!"

So. Not enough that our own cat nearly made a meal of me, I must now have pot-shots taken at me from my own slingshot.

"You wait, Venka!" I tweeted from the tree. "You wait, young fellow-me-lad! When I turn back into a man, I'll show you to shoot at me from a slingshot!"

Taking no notice of my twittering, Venka bent down and began looking for another stone. Kostya and I looked at each other, and on a sudden impulse quitted that tree together in double-quick time. I decided to fly away as far as I could from our yard, from the cat Mooska, from the tow-headed Venka with his slingshot and from all those quarrelsome unfriendly sparrows. We flew from yard to yard, and from the bird's-eye view I got of the neighbourhood I found that the cats in our town were far more numerous than I had thought when I was a man. There was a lot of boys with slingshots about, too. This discovery upset me. Scant though my experience in sparrow life had been, I already realised that if there was anything a sparrow had to avoid if he valued his life it was slingshots and cats. And Malinin, too, was beginning to get on my nerves. He was trailing along behind, lagging all the time, and in general, he was flying about with such an air that one would think he was doing me a favour.

"What are you lagging behind for all the time?" I shouted at him, losing my temper. "You slow coach, you!"

"I'm tired."

" 'Tired!' We've only flown four blocks, and he's tired already!"

"I'm not tired of flying. I'm tired of being a sparrow!"

"Look at him! He's been a sparrow for half an hour and he's tired already! What about the sparrows who are sparrows all their lives? If I'd have known you'd take it like this I wouldn't have had anything to do with you!"

I spotted below a small public garden with big trees in it and glided down.

"You can have a rest now!" I said to Kostya when he flopped down beside me on a branch.

Kostya lifted his wing and was about to hide his head under his armpit when suddenly a voice came from above.

"Here they are, the work-dodgers! I sent them to fetch straw, and there they are, sunning themselves! Fine children they are!"

EVENT FIFTEEN

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SONS DISOWN THEIR MOTHER

I looked up and saw a fat lady sparrow leaning from a near-by branch. It was she who had called us her children.

"Well, aren't you going to say something? Why don't you answer your mother?"

"I don't understand!" Kostya whispered to me. "Why does she call herself our mother?"

"What's there to understand? She must have taken us for her sons."

"Why, do we look like them?"

"How do I know."

"Why are you hiding from your mother?" the fat bird went on twittering. "Don't be afraid. Come here, I shan't touch you."

"Maybe we do look like her sons?"

"Maybe-be-wee."

"Of all the crazy ideas! I beg your pardon, madam," said Kostya. "We're not hiding from anybody, and we've never seen you before."

"How dare you madam me!" the lady sparrow screamed. "My good sparrow friends, did you hear what he calls his mother?"

A flock of birds sitting in a tree next door loudly voiced their disapproval, and the fat lady got so worked up about it that she pecked Kostya Malinin in the neck.

My good sparrow friends, did you hear what he calls his mother?

Kostya started yelling.

"I say, missus!" I butted in, standing up for Kostya. "My word of honour we are not your chi-chi-children at all! Honour bright we're not!"

"Do you hear that, good people? This one, too, disowns his own mummy," the fat sparrow screamed, dancing up and down on the branch and flapping her wings.

The sparrows began to scold Kostya and me still louder, and our "mummy" gave us such a thrashing that the feathers flew from us as if from a pillow. Malinin and I had to eat our own words and call the fat sparrow "mummy".

"That's better," she said, calming down at once. "And now, boys, let's fly out and take a lesson at nest bee-bee-building!"

"What—a lesson?" Kostya and I cried out in dismay.

EVENT SIXTEEN

KOSTYA AND I LEARN TO BUILD A NEST

"What's the matter, have you forgotten everything?" Mother Sparrow said. "Yesterday your mummy taught you how to bee-bee-build a nest, and today you will bee-bee-build it yourselves."

"I like that!" Kostya tweeted softly. "You didn't say anything about sparrows having to do lessons too!"

"How was I to know?"

"Wasn't it you who said that sparrows have a wonderful time?"

"It wasn't me, it was Nina Nikolayevna, our teacher, who said that," I lied. "Oh, leave me alone, can't you!"

"All right, you can do as you like, but you won't catch me bee-bee-building nests!" Kostya Malinin chirped out loudly.

"Who said he was not going to learn how to bee-bee-build a nest?" demanded Mother Sparrow, flying up to me and Kostya.

"It wasn't him, it was me!" I chirruped, getting in front of Kostya, and added: "I don't think it's pe-da-go-gic to hit little ones!"

"What! Where did you learn those words?"

The fat sparrow pecked my back with all her might and drove us off to a neighbouring tree where a store of horsehair, straw and other building materials had been laid in.

"Now then, this is the way you build a nest," chirped the fat lady. "You take a straw in your beak and bend it into a ring. . . ."

The lesson had begun. Kostya and I, avoiding each other's eyes, disgustedly took a straw each into our mouths.

"I wonder whether sparrows have any intervals between lessons?" I thought miserably, as I made straw rings the way the fat lady had taught us.

"And now," the fat lady went on chirping as she deftly laid out the straws and pressed them down with her breast, "and now next comes. . . ."

What comes next we never learned, because at that very moment a fat ginger sparrow dropped on our heads straight out of the sky. The branch we were sitting on rocked beneath his weight.

"Da-da-daddy has come! Our dad-da! Our popsy!" Mother Sparrow cried with delight, squatting down and rocking the branch still more strongly.

Kostya and I opened our beaks in surprise, dropping the straws and stared at the ginger sparrow, who, according to the fat lady, was our papa. . . .

EVENT SEVENTEEN

A FIGHT FOR THE NESTING-BOX

"Hurry up, boys! Hurry up my hearties!" the ginger old bird began to chitter, slapping his fat legs and sides with his wings. "The martins are going south. Their nesting-box is becoming vacant. A splendid house!"

"A nesting-box! Oh, how wonderful! My dream! My dream!" the Mother Sparrow babbled.

"Yes. A nesting-box. The thing is to occupy it before somebody else does. I'm afraid we'll have to fight for it! Come along, quick! Qui-qui-quick!"

"Qui-qui-quick!" I chimed in, deciding that a fight for a nesting-box was better than a nest building lesson, anyway.

"Do we *have* to fight? Couldn't we better take a lesson at nest building?" piped Kostya Malinin.

"Don't be so clever! I'd like to hear what song you'll sing in the winter, when it gets cold!"

"That's just it!" I chimed in.

The ginger bird flew off the branch, pushed me and Kostya off with his wing, and shot ahead, twittering for all he was worth and showing us the way. His wife brought up the rear, and as soon as Kostya and I began to lag she prodded us on with her sharp beak and gave us beans.

"Now then, don't lag! Get a·move on! On you go!" chattered Old Ginger, looking back every now and then.

"You wait, Yuri, I'll never forgive you this!" Kostya said as we flew along. "If you're set on remaining a sparrow for the rest of your life, then remain one and go and fight for your nesting-box. But count me out. I'm going to do a bunk as soon as I get the chance! And that's that!"

"Not so loud, you silly ass! You'll spoil the whole thing. We can't shake off Old Ginger now in any case."

"Then what are we to do? I'm dead beat, I can't be a sparrow any longer!"

"What to do? We'll run away as soon as we get the chance. Wait for my signal. You're safe with Barankin!"

"Safe, eh? I like that! About as safe as a mouse in a cat's paws!" moaned Kostya Malinin.

And he proved to be right. We had a narrow escape, and it was all my fault. I should never have agreed to fight for that nesting-box!

We didn't get a chance to slip away during the flight, of course. Old Ginger and his wife kept an eye on us all the time and did not let us lag behind by as much as an inch. Things were turning out worse than I had thought. If we did get mixed up in that fight against our will, I'd manage to twist out of it somehow, but not Kostya—Kostya was sure to get it in the neck. He wasn't much of a fighter anyhow, still less when it came to a fight with sparrows.

No sooner did this thought occur to me than all of a sudden a frantic chirruping arose close by and our whole "family" tore into a crowd of sparrows who were fighting in a strange garden for the very nesting-box our "parents" were dreaming of.

I don't know how it happened, but Kostya and I suddenly found ourselves in the thick of the melée and immediately lost sight of father and mother sparrow.

Right and left of us, above and below, sparrows were whirling round us, chirruping like mad.

Luckily Kostya Malinin had the presence of mind to take hold of my tail with his beak, otherwise we would certainly have lost each other in the commotion.

It was no easy job, of course, towing Kostya along and beating off the attackers at one and the same time, but I cleverly managed to dodge the attacking sparrows and hurled curses and threats at them.

I zoomed off, went into a tail spin, then a corkscrew spin, I nose-dived and tried other aerial stunts until I succeeded at last in breaking out of the enemy encirclement.

Seeing that the danger was past, Kostya let go of my tail, and we both fled as fast as we could to get away from those thrice-accursed sparrows.

"Give 'em hell! Wring their necks for them!" sparrow voices suddenly sounded behind us.

I looked round and saw that four sparrows had detached themselves from the fighting mob and were in hot pursuit. . . .

EVENT EIGHTEEN

KOSTYA MALININ IS THROUGH. . .

"Is this ever going to end?" Malinin groaned, putting on a burst of speed.

"These were the chaps who chirruped loudest!" one of our pursuers shouted. They were now close upon our heels.

"You're mistaken, boys! We were only twittering!" I shouted back.

"What were you doing there then?"

"We weren't doing anything. We just came to look."

"To look, eh? We'll show you!"

The sparrows began to catch up with us, and would probably have given us a thrashing that would have left neither feathers nor down of me and Malinin, had I not suddenly hit on a clever fighting trick. Letting

our pursuers come up close I suddenly turned over on to my back in mid-air and kicked out hard at the nearest sparrow. He went flying aside and hit a fence with a smack.

I kicked another, and sent him flying too. I kept kicking until all our pursuers had been scattered. My tactics had put the wind up them, and they began to drop behind.

Taking advantage of the enemy's confusion, we cracked on speed, took refuge behind a screen of trees and dropped exhausted on to the first roof we came across.

I was streaming and my heart jumped like the lid of a boiling kettle.

"I'm through," gasped Kostya. "You can do as you like, but no more of this sparrow life for me!"

Malinin thumped the roof with his beak and began calling me all the names he could think of for my having lied to him about the wonderful time sparrows were supposed to have.

"He observed them for over a month, if you please!" Malinin said. " 'The sparrow lives without a care in the world!' "

"It isn't my fault. It's what I thought," I said.

But Kostya Malinin said:

"I told you we should turn into butterflies in the first instance. Butterflies don't have to build nests, cats don't eat them and they don't live on oats, they live on sweet nectar. Must be delicious!"

I said nothing. Kostya Malinin knew much more about butterflies than I did. He had a whole collection of them at one time, but exchanged it for stamps. He knew a lot about butterflies, I must say. He even knew what names they had and what family each one belonged to. Maybe Kostya was right, and we should have turned ourselves into butterflies from the very beginning. The idea of fluttering about all day long from flower to flower, eating sweets all the time, was very pleasing, of course.

Nevertheless, before turning into butterflies, I wanted to ask Kostya more about their lives and habits. I didn't want to have us put our foot into it again.

"Don't you remember Nina Nikolayevna telling us that butterflies pollinate the flowers?" I said.

"So what? Let them if they want to. But you and I won't. We're not fools."

Although there was iron logic in Kostya's reply, I nevertheless decided to ask him one more question.

"How are things withthem as regards school? Do butterflies have to learn as well?"

"How many more questions are you going to ask? Look, the cats are here already!" Kostya Malinin yelled at me like mad.

I thought he was pulling my leg. But then I looked round and saw three sooty cats creeping out on to the roof from the dormer-window. They stared at me and Kostya. Two of them were strangers to me, but the third was our cat Mooska. She seemed to have made up her mind to eat me. This was no time to stand arguing.

"Get ready for retransformation into butterflies!" I commanded in a feverish whisper.

"Ready's the word!" answered Malinin.

"Ready, steady, go!" I said.

"Hold on!" said Kostya Malinin. "Haven't we got to say something? What about the words?"

I had completely forgotten that the magic words I had used for the sparrow trick would not work for the butterfly trick.

"Just a minute!" I said. "I'll alter it."

"Hurry up then!" Kostya screamed.

"Ready!" I said. "Repeat it after me. I don't want to be a sparrow. I want to be a butterfly."

As I am aware,
The butterfly lives without a care!
Hocus-pocus I do cry,
Now I am a butterfly!

"Sounds like Double Dutch," Kostya said, staring in horror at the approaching cats.

"You won't think so when you're inside one of those cats! Hurry up and repeat it!"

And Kostya Malinin, shutting his eyes in terror began gabbling the Double Dutch magic words, going nineteen to my dozen. . . .

As I am aware,
The butterfly lives. . . .

"I hope to goodness we're not late!" I was thinking, hoping that the cats wouldn't get us before the transformation. This was the last thought that flashed through my tortured sparrow brain. . . .

PART THREE

I'M A CABBAGE BUTTERFLY AND KOSTYA A SWALLOW-TAIL

EVENT NINETEEN

A PEST WELL KNOWN TO THE POPULATION...

While Kostya and I were gabbling the magic words in a frantic whisper and concentrating, the cats, with Mooska in the lead, were losing no time either. Stepping warily on their padded paws, they crept nearer and nearer.

"You wait, Mooska," I said to myself. "If only I live to tell the tale you'll be sorry for this."

I decided to put the thought of cats out of my mind, as this interfered with my transformation into a butterfly. I concentrated all my attention now on flowers, on a life in which I would not have to build nests or fight for a nesting-box, but only flutter from flower to flower, basking in the sun and eating nothing but nectar. But instead, as if on purpose, the accursed oats were uppermost in my mind and before my eyes swam sparrows, cats, Venka with his slingshot and all kinds of similar nonsense from my sparrow's life.

It worried me. I opened my eyes and saw that the distance between me and the cats had grown much shorter, that accursed sparrow I had been and accursed sparrow I remained. This upset me still more, and I decided to keep my eyes open. I no longer cared.

The cats took several more steps, then suddenly stopped and began miaowing and sniffing with their heads together.

"They're discussing who's to eat whom," I thought. "Dividing two sparrows among three cats. Oh, who cares! One thing is certain—I won't have time now to turn into a butterfly." Just in case, however, I repeated the magic words to myself several times:

As I am aware,
The butterfly lives without a care!
Hocus-pocus, I do cry,
Now I am a butterfly!

The cats had a bit of an argument, then separated. One of them started creeping up to Kostya, while Mooska and her friend made for me. "The cunning beast! She knows she won't get the better of me by herself. What have I done to her?" I thought, keeping an eye on her all the time. "Only once did I splash some ink over her, and that was by accident."

Three paces short of me Mooska and her assistant stopped. They crouched down, arched their backs and began clawing at the iron roof, making ready for the spring. "They're going to jump! That means Kostya and I have not turned into butterflies," I thought. "Too late. We're done for." I began to feel creepy all over. Obviously, these were going to be the last creeps in my life. I was about to shout out: "Good-bye, Malinin! Sorry I dragged you into this!" when something started happening to the cats. Their eyes popped, they started snorting and instead of springing at us they sprang away from us with all their might. Their fur stood up on end and shaking their heads in a dazed sort of way all three of them leapt into the air again and made a bee-line for the dormer-window.

They disappeared so quickly and suddenly as if they had seen a huge dog behind us. I looked round, but there was no dog there. What I did see was a butterfly's wings sticking up behind my back like two boat's sails.

So that's what had frightened the cats. Before their very eyes the edible sparrow had turned into an inedible butterfly. I had done it after all! Wasn't that wonderful! I twitched my little triangular wings in delight and turned to Kostya Malinin to tell him the good news, but what I saw made me speechless. I stared in surprise. Next to me, on the spot where a minute ago Malinin had been lying prostrate, a half-dead sparrow tweeting feebly, there now sat a beautiful butterfly with great triangular wings coloured black and green.

I had never seen such a beautiful butterfly, not even in picture books.

I couldn't believe that Kostya Malinin had turned into such a beautiful insect. It must be a real one—you could tell that at once. But if this was a real butterfly, then what had happened to my friend Malinin? Surely he hadn't toppled off the roof on to the pavement below through sheer fright? I looked down. Maybe that cat had got him while I wasn't looking? I looked at the dormer-window. May be he had taken fright and flown over to a near-by tree? I turned round and began to examine the poplar growing next to the house.

Before the cats' very eyes the edible sparrow turned into an inedible butterfly

"What are you fidgeting about there? You're not at a lesson, are you?" the beautiful butterfly said to me in the voice of Kostya Malinin.

I stared at the butterfly with all my eyes and asked in a voice not like my own:

"Who are you?"

"D'you mean to say you don't know me, Barankin?"

"Malinin, can this be you!"

"Who else can it be? Don't you recognise me?"

"My word! That's what I call a transformation for you! I was beginning to worry. I was afraid something had happened to you."

"What, to me? Don't make me laugh!" Malinin said, spreading his wings.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from Kostya, he was simply gorgeous.

"Kostya," I said, "what are you called?"

"What am I called? Very simple. Let me see. Are my wings black-and-green on top?"

"They are."

"And what are they underneath?"

"Brownish-black."

"With gold spots?"

"Yes. And on each wing a half moon and a whole rainbow."

"That's clear now. I have turned into a Swallow-Tail of the family Papilio Machaon."

"And I?"

"You?... Turn round, will you."

I turned round. Malinin looked me over critically from head to foot.

"Yes..." he said. "You have small wings, yellow ones with black patches. Yes. You've turned into er ... a pest."

"A pest? What pest?"

"A garden pest. Known to the population under the name of cabbage butterfly, cabbager for short."

"Tell me another one! How is it I have turned into a cabbager and you into a Swallow-Tail?"

"'How, how'! How do I know! I suppose it's because the Swallow-Tail occurs in the Far East, and I lived in Khabarovsk for three years. And you occur in the central zone of Russia."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. I had a collection, don't forget. I know all the butterfly species going. I'm a Swallow-Tail and you're a pest."

"A fat lot you know! Let me tell you, a cabbager is even better than a Swallow-Tail."

"How's that?"

"Because you've got fancy wings, all dolled up like a girl's. Why, I'd be ashamed to be seen by any of the boys—I mean butterflies—with wings like that."

"If you don't like it you can lump it!"

I flew up over the roof and made a trial circle near the dormer-window. My wings were not as serviceable as a sparrow's, of course, but they were good enough for flying.

"How does it feel?" Kostya asked me.

"Fine!" I answered. "Only I'm awfully hungry."

"That's easily remedied," Malinin said. "I'll treat you to some nectar in a minute. Now that's a drink for you! Your oats don't come anywhere near it. Delicious isn't the word for it! Let's fly off."

EVENT TWENTY

"THE SLEEPING BEAUTY"

Kostya and I made a parting circle over the roof and were about to start off in search of nectar when Kostya suddenly noticed a yellow little butterfly on the wall of the house. She was sitting under the iron gutter with feet gripping the brickwork and wings folded like a closed book.

"That's a real one," Kostya Malinin said. "Hullo, Goldilocks!" he shouted, waving a foot in the air.

"Hurry up, let's get that nectar," I said.

"Wait a minute. I'd like to have a word with Goldilocks."

"Oh, you give me the pip, you and your girls!"

"Hullo, Goldilocks!" Kostya Malinin repeated, alighting on the wall next to the yellow butterfly.

"Kostya-Machaon's running after the girls!" I began to tease Malinin, flying right over his head.

Kostya greeted the butterfly once more, but she sat silent and motionless and took no notice of him whatever.

"Putting on airs," I said. "Serves you jolly well right."

"No, she's not putting on airs," Kostya said, looking at the butterfly closely. "She's asleep."

"I see. The Sleeping Beauty. Wake up, Sleeping Beauty! Prince Machaon wants to make your acquaintance."

I alighted next to the sleeping butterfly and began to shake her.

"It's no use," said Kostya. "You won't wake her now with cannon shots. She's gone to sleep for the whole winter, you know."

"For the whole winter? Why?"

"Because its a law of nature with them, with butterflies."

"Tell me another one! What law of nature is that?"

"My word of honour! All butterflies die in the autumn or go to sleep until the spring. They even have a time-table, who's to go to sleep and when."

"Wait a minute. Then what about us?" I said in dismay.

"What about it?"

"You and I are butterflies too, aren't we? That means we'll fall asleep, too, by time-table?"

"Well, being butterflies, I suppose we'll have to go to sleep, too, er . . . some time or other."

This was a stunning discovery.

"Then why did we turn ourselves into butterflies," I yelled, "if at any minute we may fall asleep, and for the whole winter at that! We've become butterflies only for a day, and if we suddenly go off to sleep we'll miss everything—the winter holidays, the skating, the hockey. Ugh, Malinin, Malinin!"

"Keep your hair on!" Kostya said. "You don't feel sleepy yet, do you?"

"Not yet."

"Well then, let's go after the nectar. We'll worry about that when the time comes."

"What do you mean, 'when the time comes'? What if I go to sleep while we're flying and don't wake up until the spring? What am I going to do at the exams when I turn into a man again? Get bad marks all round through you?"

"Look at him!" said Kostya. "At home you can't get him to go to bed, and here, if you please, he's afraid he'll go to sleep flying. Don't worry, you won't fall asleep. You can take my word for it."

"Sure I won't?"

"Of course you won't. D'you know what butterflies go to sleep in the autumn? The ordinary ones. But you and I are not ordinary butterflies. See?"

"Then what are we?"

"You and I are humanoid butterflies!" Malinin yelled at me.

"So what?" I yelled back.

"Well, this law of nature maybe doesn't apply to humanoid butterflies."

"But say it does?"

I was about to scold Kostya Malinin for being so light-minded, especially for having had a collection of butterflies and concealing from me such a terrible law of nature, but just then a sparrow flew past overhead with a whirr of wings and immediately came back again.

At the sight of that sparrow Malinin, for some reason, stopped shouting at me, cowered and hid himself under the roof.

The sparrow clung to the wall not far from where I was sitting and fixed one eye on me. He looked familiar to me somehow, that sparrow did. When he turned to me sideways, I saw that he had no tail. Now I recognised him at once—it was that dock-tailed sparrow I had had a fight with in the yard over those oat grains.

"Hullo, old bean!" I shouted to my old acquaintance. "You're not cross with me, are you?"

"Barankin, hide yourself, quick!" I heard Kostya's voice behind me. "He'll gobble you up!"

"Gobble me up?" But before the words were out of my mouth Malinin leapt out of his hiding-place, grabbed hold of my foot and pulled me in under the iron gutter.

In the same instant the tailless sparrow swooped, but seeing that I was gone, he turned his head round from side to side, then crept up to the Sleeping Beauty, examined her closely, gobbled her up in an instant and flew off as if nothing had happened.

I watched the retreating sparrow from under the roof, then stared at Malinin.

"I forgot to warn you, Barankin," Kostya said with a guilty air. "Real sparrows are very fond of eating butterflies, so try to keep out of their way."

Naturally, I was strongly tempted at that moment to tell Kostya what I thought about him and about butterfly life in general, but instead I folded my feet on my chest and held my peace. After all, I wasn't Malinin

to start whimpering when he got tired of being a sparrow. I'm Barankin, I am. Once I've turned into a butterfly, I'll bear all my hardships and my sufferings in silence, like a real man. Besides, I simply had no strength to scold Malinin—I was so hungry at that moment.

EVENT TWENTY-ONE

THE ACK-ACK CAP

Waiting until the sparrow was at a safe distance, Kostya and I crept out from under the roof and flew off towards a flowerbed below in search of nectar.

"Birds are only dangerous high up in the air," Kostya said. "But nearer the ground they're not so dangerous. If the worst comes to the worst, hide yourself when you see a sparrow."

"It's all very well to say 'hide yourself'! But what if you get eaten up yourself while you're eating nectar?" I felt like asking Malinin, but I held my peace again. There were lots of flowers on the flowerbed—red, white and blue ones—and all of them gave off a wonderful scent of nectar. It was like a whiff of cakes from mother's kitchen.

The mere smell of the nectar made my mouth water and my head dizzy. I wasn't listening any more to what Kostya was saying. I chose a nice big flower all on my own and circled round it, looking for a landing-place.

"Kill it!" I suddenly heard a shrill voice behind me.

I turned over in the air and saw two boys near by with spades in their hands. They were waving their caps and running towards me with a heavy stamp of feet.

"It's a gypsy moth. Kill it! I know this pest!" one of them shouted, and putting his fingers into his mouth he gave a piercing whistle.

Being, as Kostya said, a cabbage butterfly, which had nothing in common with the gypsy moth, I took no notice of the boys' shouts. I turned over again in the air and went on circling round the big flower which smelt so deliciously of nectar. At that very moment a huge shadow covered me from behind, and a whistling blast of air threw me to the ground.

"Hooray! We've got him!" one of the boys cried, waving his cap over his head.

The boy's voice sounded familiar.

"No, we haven't," the other boy said. "It's hidden itself among the flowers. Look for it."

This boy's voice sounded familiar too. I took a good look at the gypsy-moth hunters and recognised both of them. They were my class-mates Venka Smirnov—the one who had taken shots at Kostya and me with his slingshot when we were sparrows—and his tagtail Genka Koromyslov.

"You wait, Venka!" I said to myself. "Lucky for you I'm a butterfly just now. otherwise I'd have my own back on you for everything!" Meanwhile Venka and Genka began to search for me in the grass and among the flowers. But I kept a cool head. The moment I dropped on the ground I folded my wings and pretended that I was not a butterfly but a dry birch leaf. The boys stamped around next to me, and one of them even kicked me aside without knowing it. Waiting until their backs were turned, I flew up and away into the air.

"There it is!" the gypsy-moth hunters yelled, but they were too late.

I had shot up high into the air and found myself next to Malinin.

"There I was, shouting to you, 'Fly away!'" Kostya yelled at me in a frightened voice, "and you were trying to crawl into a flower!"

"But they were shouting, 'Kill the gypsy moth!' and you said I was a cabbage butterfly."

"A fat lot those duffers know about butterflies and moths," Kostya said, alighting on an electric clock hanging from a pole over the flowerbed.

I looked at the clock and scratched the back of my head. It was already twelve o'clock and our lives were not by any means going the way Kostya Malinin had said they would. I was getting hungrier and hungrier, but Venka and Genka did not budge an inch from the flowerbed. They winked at me, they waved their arms, they nodded their heads and waited patiently for me to alight again on the flowerbed. Take me for a fool, eh! I thought they would get fed up waiting and would go away, and then Kostya and I would have a proper go at that nectar, but the goofs started whistling again, waving their arms and calling me all kinds of names.

"Pests yourselves!" I shouted angrily. "That girl Fokina is waiting for you in the garden to plant trees, and here you are, fooling around with butterflies!"

After that Genka shied his cap at us, and Venka tried to climb up the pole but slid down.

"We shan't be able to have our lunch here," Kostya said, as if reading my own thoughts.

EVENT TWENTY-TWO

GOOD-BYE, BOYS! WE MAY NEVER MEET AGAIN...

"I tell you what." I said to Kostya, "let's fly to some vegetable garden. It's fine there now, everything ripe—turnips, and carrots, and cabbages. And there are flowers there too. And not so many people about."

"Ugh, you miserable cabbager, you," Kostya said, "through you we dare not go to a vegetable garden now."

"Why not?"

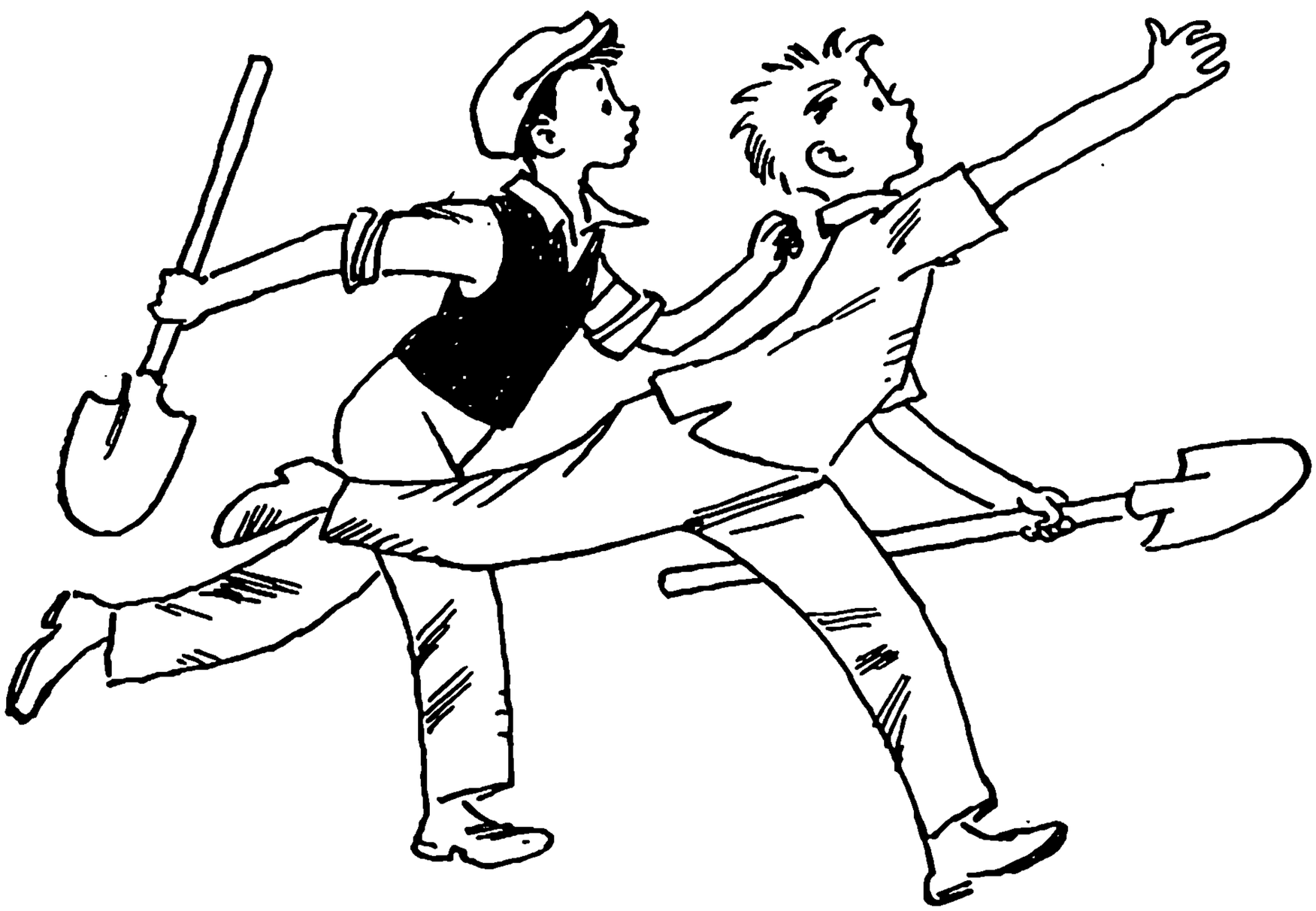
"Because they're poisoning pests like you now in all the vegetable gardens."

"What with?"

"Oh, all kinds of chemicals, poisons. . . ."

This bit of dispiriting news gave me a nasty shock.

"Damn it all!" I cried angrily. "In the street you're likely to have your wings torn off at any moment, in the gardens they poison you, in the sky the sparrows gobble you up. Why the dickens did we turn into butterflies then? To die of starvation?"



"Don't get mad about it, Barankin," said Kostya. "I'll treat you to nectar all right. Come along!"

"Where to?"

"To the school garden."

"But the children are planting trees there!"

"All the better! We'll have a go at the nectar in the flower garden and see our pals at the same time."

Kostya Malinin sounded as if he were missing our class-mates very much.

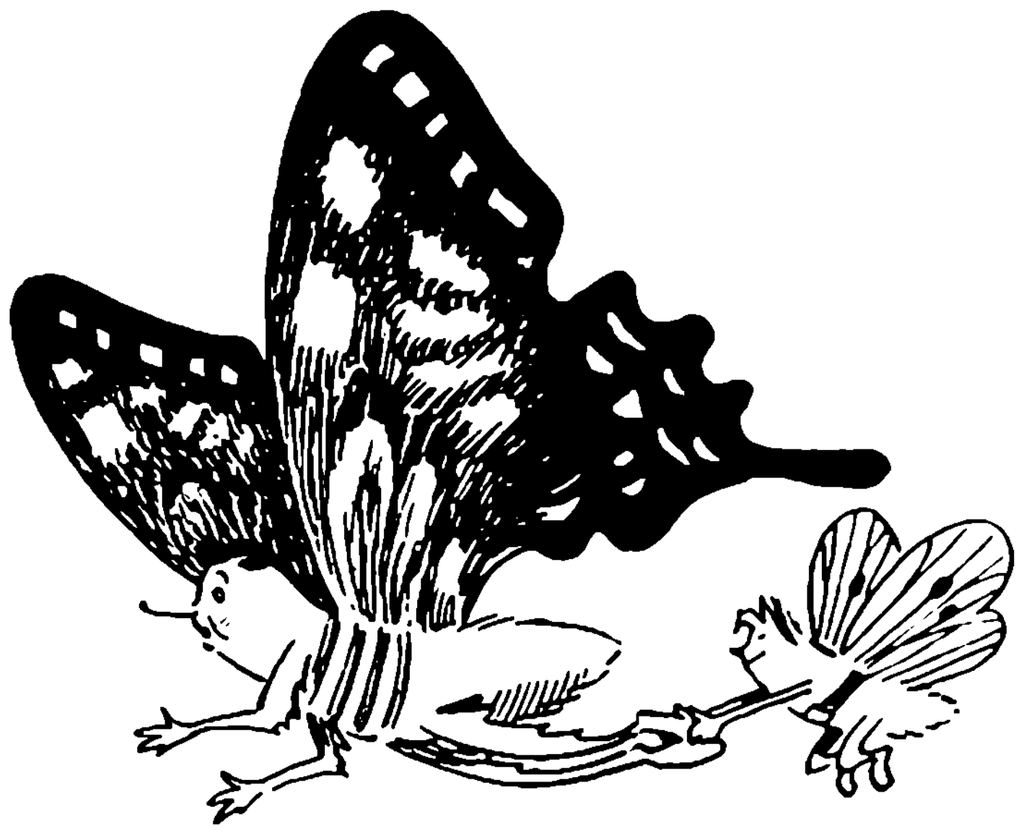
"All right, to school then be it," I said.

I too had a sudden longing to see our old class-mates. I don't know why. And although I was simply dying for something to eat at that moment, I suddenly felt a still stronger desire to simply fly past our school, past our class, of which I had so many fond memories. Did I say "fond"? What's happening to me? I think I'm beginning to go crazy with hunger. To take a grip on myself I shook myself like a dog coming out of the water. And a good thing, too, because this shaking scattered my dreary thoughts in all directions like so much spray, and I felt much better. Now I could think of this encounter in a manly fashion, without any emotions, not like Kostya Malinin, whose eyes grew big as big can be, and, if you ask me, moist as well, the moment he started to speak about our school-mates.

"We'll have lunch there," Kostya said wistfully.

"And dinner and supper too, while we're at it," I said cheerfully, feeling that lunch alone would hardly satisfy me.

We flew off the clock and struck out for the school garden at top speed. For the first time in our lives Kostya and I were running to school at a pace we usually reserved only for returning home from school. I was sure that I would be there first, of course. But great was my surprise when I found myself lagging at the very start, being three houses behind Malinin. At first I could hardly believe my own eyes. Kostya was considered a bit of a pushover in our class, and at physical culture lessons no one even tried to vie with me. My report card always showed excellent marks for physical culture (but my mother for some reason did not think much of them). I decided to make a spurt and began to work my triangular yellow wings like mad. But it was no use. Kostya, on his fancy wings, flew like an arrow, while I kept dropping into air-pockets or something, staggering about, turning head over heels and generally moving like a fly through a glue pot. Seeing me tagging along behind, Kostya



Malinin, to my shame, flew back and said such words to me, Barankin, the strongest boy in the class, that I shall never forget them as long as I live. He said: "Hi, you cabbager, you! Can't you fly any quicker than that? What are you lagging for all the time?" And out of sheer spite. he flew ahead again. easy as you like, then came back again. shouting: "Come on, Barankin! A cabbage pie could fly better than that! Step on the gas! The nectar's not far off now!" Never shall I forget those words of Malinin's either. When next he flew past me triumphantly, his wings working like a pair of oars, I grabbed hold of his hind legs and was hauled along as if at the end of a tow-line. Seeing that I was no longer lagging, Kostya stopped hurling insults at me, and try as he could. he was unable to get ahead of me any more.

"The going's become much harder, I can't make it out," said Kostya.

"Much easier, if you ask me," I said, thinking: "Let him work for the two of us now that he has such wings. I dragged him along by my tail when I was a sparrow, so I have a full right to take it easy now."

I slipped through the air in Malinin's wake with folded wings, beating them once in a while to pretend I was flying. And so Kostya towed me all the way to the school, right up to the place where our class were planting trees in the school garden.

"Back pedal! We've arrived!" I shouted to Kostya, who, puffing hard, hauled me over the top of a tree and trudged towards the brick building of our school.

Alighting on a second-floor window-sill we crept to the very edge and looked down. Work in the garden was in full swing. Chattering gaily, the children were digging holes, carefully lowering saplings into them and watering them out of watering-pots. Kostya Sergeyev purposely smeared dirt all over himself and was making faces. Everyone was laughing. All were pleased. All were happy.

"If they want to work, let them!" Kostya said. "They'll work and we'll eat nectar. If they knew that we are going to eat real nectar in a minute they would envy us, I'm sure."

"Envy whom, did you say?"

"Us, butterflies," Kostya said uncertainly.

I thought of the Sleeping Beauty that tailless sparrow had gobbled up, listened to the rumblings in my hungry belly and looked with hatred at the sparrows as they darted from branch to branch in the school garden.

"Yes, I daresay they would envy us," I said without enthusiasm, and, turning away from the boys and girls, I saw Mishka Yakovlev come flying through the school gate on his bicycle with Alik Novikov sitting behind.

Shouting loudly, they rolled straight up to Zina Fokina, then sprang to the ground and began talking excitedly to her and the other children who had gathered around. Silence fell upon the garden. No one laughed or joked any more, and Kostya Sergeyev even wiped the dirt off his face with a handkerchief and stopped grimacing.

"Something has happened," Kostya said.

I didn't answer. After speaking with our class monitor, Mishka and Alik rode away again on their bike. Zina Fokina watched them from under her cupped hand, then called up three of the boys, took their spades from them and sent them away on some errand. The boys ran out into the street and made off in different directions.

"They're looking for somebody," Malinin said.

"They're looking for us," I said.

"Oh, I should worry!" Kostya said. "While they'll be looking for us, we'll be eating nectar. Come along!"

I said nothing. I was getting hungrier and hungrier, and the nectar was nearer than ever. . . . But so were the sparrows, and their chirruping did not improve my appetite.

"I hope to goodness they won't have a peck at me and Kostya," I thought, gazing at the sparrows as they streaked in and out among the flowers. I was thinking of this, but said something quite different.

"Come along!" I said loudly and firmly, adding under my breath: "Good-bye, boys. If the sparrows gobble us up, we shall probably never see each other again."

Steering for the flowerbed, I spread my wings and swooped down like a swallow, as if diving into cold water from a spring-board.

EVENT TWENTY-THREE

ANTI-SNEEZE

The flowers gave off a delicious smell of nectar. It was like a whiff of mother's cakes baking in the kitchen. My mouth started watering and I felt dizzy. I folded my wings and made a bee-line for the biggest flower. I dived into it head first, but missed it (it wasn't surprising!) and landed on my ear among the grass thickets. I had to scramble out of the grass and start all over again. This time I reached the flower by climbing up the stalk, and dipped my proboscis right into the middle of the flower where I figured the nectar should be. But the long-looked-for nectar was not there. The smell of nectar was there, but not the nectar itself. It smelt nice, exactly like mother's empty scent bottle, but there was nothing there to eat. Then I pushed my head right into the flower, so that only my wings and legs were sticking out, and hardly had I begun to rummage about there in the dark when I felt something coming out of the flower towards me. I thought it was some butterfly who had got in there before me and cleaned out the larder. The mere thought of it made me wild. Here I was, one might say, risking my life for this nectar, only to have someone sneaking in and licking the place clean! I went and

butted the intruder! He started to buzz threateningly and butted me back. Then he pressed his head against mine and squeezed me out of the flower like tooth-paste out of a tube. In a fit of rage, I struck the stamens with my wings so hard that the pollen flew up in a cloud and enveloped me. It very nearly chocked me.

"You wait, Mr. Butterfly," I said, fanning the pollen away with my wings. "You just come out in the open, I'll break all your bones for you.... A-choo! I'll show you, stealing nectar from... A-a-choo!"

While I was sneezing, the intruder crawled out of the flower. It wasn't a butterfly at all. It was a bee, a real bee, stripes and all, as if he were wearing sleeping pyjamas. He crawled out of the flower and goggled at me with his peepers. There he stood, glaring, and me sitting on the edge of the flower sneezing at him and barely able to keep my foothold. The bee was so surprised he even stopped buzzing. I kept sneezing and he kept wiping himself, saying nothing. I must have sneezed at least a dozen times at that bee before I realised with dismay what I was doing. "Barankin," I said to myself, "who are you sneezing at, Barankin? You're sneezing at a bee, you wretched cabbager, you. You wait, he'll—a-choo!—give you a shot of anti-sneeze, that'll teach you—a-choo!—to sneeze at bees! You remember that time when bees stung you in the country when you were a human, so you—a-choo!—know what you're in for."

"I do!" I answered myself, and toppled over backwards into the grass.

I turned head over heels in the air several times, then, rolling up my empty proboscis, I levelled out just over the top of the grass and made off as fast as my wings could carry me. I flew across the path towards the trees, amid whose trunks I caught a glimpse of colourful twinkling wings, apparently Kostya Malinin's.

I thought Malinin had left me in the lurch among the flowers, but it appeared that he, too, was being chased by a bee, who was buzzing angrily and cursing away in bee's language for all he was worth.

"Serves him right!" I thought, watching the lively chase. "It's a pity there's only one bee, though. I'd let loose a hundred of them on him if I had the chance. That would teach him to wag his tongue and mislead his friends. 'We'll flutter from flower to flower! We'll fill ourselves up with nectar!' That bee will treat him to some 'nectar' in a minute. He won't want to turn into a butterfly any more after that.... A-choo!"

"Help!" Malinin shrieked. "Barankin! Where are you? Oo, mummy!"

I wanted the bee to chase him a bit longer so's to teach him a good lesson, but when he screamed in such a piteous voice I began to feel sorry

for him. And then I recollected that Malinin was not a man, but a butterfly. If that bee stung him he might get ill, or still worse, he might die from bee poison. What would I do with him then? I had no idea how a bee's sting affects butterflies. For all I knew, it might be deadly.

Snatching up a light twig I flew up to that bee from behind and gave him a whack over the head with all my might. Stunned by the blow, the bee dropped into the bushes, and I felt so weak with hunger that everything went dark before my eyes, and I lurched over on one side and began falling into the grass.

EVENT TWENTY-FOUR

I REALISE MY MISTAKE, BUT THE TERRIBLE LAW OF NATURE HAS BEGUN TO WORK

When I opened my eyes I found myself lying on the bank of a big puddle, and next to me sat my best pal Malinin, fanning me with his fancy wings.

"What's the matter with you?" Kostya asked me.

"Nothing, I just wanted to lie down a bit..." I said. "A-choo! I just can't get rid of this sneezing fit."

"I'll tell you where else we can get some nectar," Kostya began.

"Oh, go and swallow yourself, you and your nectar.... A-choo!" I eyed Malinin over with a scornful look and nearly burst out laughing.

He was sitting on the puddle bank, covered from head to foot with pollen, one of his wings sticking up, the other hanging limp like a dog's ear. He looked such a misery that I began to feel terribly sorry for him again, but I pulled myself together.

Mustering my last ounce of strength I crawled up to the puddle and began drinking the water, just ordinary rain water, with relish.

Malinin made another attempt to speak to me, but my only answer to all his questions was now silence. I had made up my mind never to speak to him again as long as I lived.

I demonstratively drank the unboiled water out of the puddle (and that instead of the promised nectar!) and meditated. Had I been mistaken after all? No. I could never believe that there was no such life on earth as the one I had dreamt of, sitting on that bench in our yard. There was such a life, and I was going to find it, come what may! Kostya and I had simply been looking for it in the wrong place, that's all. Of course, our transformation into butterflies and sparrows had been a mistake. That much was clear to me now. Their life only looked good to an outsider, but actually, on closer acquaintance. it was simply unbearable. But why? I sat, silently drinking water. thinking and thinking, and decided that the kind of life Kostya and I had been dreaming of probably did not exist on earth at all. . . .

At that moment an ant ran past me along the banks of the puddle. It ran, then stopped, and I looked at it and continued to brood on the painful subject. "If there's no such life on the earth," I thought, "then it must be THERE, under the earth. and if you can't escape cares and worries by flying away from them, then maybe you can simply hide from them, just go and hide away—inside an ant-heap, let's say." I followed the ant with my eyes and shook my head doubtfully. One could hide in an ant-heap, if it came to that, but what about the ants? They were famous workers, real steady plodders, you might say. I had watched them a good deal and had never seen an ant just sitting still, doing nothing. They were always running somewhere or returning from somewhere, always lugging along a leaf, or a bit of earth, or a pine needle or something. And the ant-heap, too, whenever you looked at it. you always saw them doing repairs and decoration, busy at it from morning till night. It's easy to say—go and turn yourself into an ant; afterwards they'll make you work your head off on all sorts of building jobs. No thank you, I'd rather turn into anything but an ant. But into what? What can we turn ourselves into without getting dragged into fights and squabbles from which Kostya and I had barely managed to escape with a whole skin?

While I was trying to puzzle this out, I suddenly recollected that Alik Novikov, at that ill-starred meeting, had called us drones for some reason or other. D-r-o-n-e-s! Just a minute! Just a minute! What is a drone? A drone, by the way, happens to be one of those creatures who lead the kind of life Kostya and I had dreamed of, sitting on that bench! In that case

why did we turn ourselves into sparrows and butterflies? Silly asses! What hopeless asses Kostya and I were!

"Malinin!" I cried (when I realised our mistake I stopped being angry with Kostya, of course, and decided to tell him about my discovery). "Malinin!" I shouted. "Gee, what fools we are, Malinin!"

"Of course we are," Malinin readily agreed. "Especially you, Barankin."

"Yes, of course, I'm just a drooling idiot! Fancy not thinking of that before! The time we've wasted!"

"That's just it," said Kostya.

"Why the dickens did we have to turn ourselves into sparrows and butterflies?"

"That's just what I was going to ask you, Barankin," said Malinin. "Why did we have to turn ourselves into butterflies and sparrows?"

"When we should have turned ourselves into drones to begin with!"

"Drones? Why drones?" Kostya cried in a frightened voice.

"Because drones never do anything in their lives or do only what they want to do. That's why they're called drones. And that's just what we've been dreaming of, Malinin."

"Look here, Barankin!" Malinin said in a nasty tone of voice. "Because of you I've spent so much strength trying to do nothing, that I would have been better off trying to do something all this time."

"Malinin!" I shouted. "But I spent as much strength as you did. Now we'll turn into drones and take a rest from all this."

"What? Transform again?" howled Kostya Malinin. "Nothing doing, Barankin! I've had enough, Barankin! I'm fed up to the teeth with transforming!"

"But Kostya, those two times don't count. Don't you see, if we transformed into the wrong thing, then it doesn't count at all!"

"Why doesn't it count?"

"Because, after all, we've got to transform into the right thing, and the right thing we had to transform into in the first place was d-r-o-n-e-s!"

"Drones? What drones?" Kostya said in a voice that had suddenly become calm and apathetic.

"Don't be silly," I said. "Don't you know what drones are?"

"I don't know what drones are," Malinin answered, stretching and yawning.

"Oh, come on, Kostya," I said, somewhat taken aback. "You ought to know what drones are."

"Why ought I to know what drones are? Do *you* know, Barankin?"

I was about to shout that of course I know what drones are, but the words stuck in my throat, because, frankly speaking, I didn't have the foggiest idea what those wonderful drones Kostya and I should long ago have turned ourselves into looked like. Instead I said something quite different.

"What's the matter with you, Malinin?" I said. "Don't you remember the teacher telling us about drones and showing us pictures of them?"

"I don't," Malinin said. "Nor can you remember."

"Why not?"

"Because at that lesson you and I were inventing a new language."

So we were. At that lesson Kostya and I had not been listening to the teacher at all—we had been busy inventing a new language. It was a difficult job. We had to invent a language which only two people in the world could understand—Kostya Malinin and me. So, naturally, we had other things on our minds instead of the teacher and drones.

"Just a minute, Malinin," I said. "But you glanced at the blackboard once in a while, didn't you?"

"So what?"

"Maybe you remember, by chance, what these drones look like?"

"I don't remember anything," Malinin said, stretching again and yawning.

"Maybe you're saying that on purpose so's not to transform into drones?"

"My word of honour I'm not!"

This was a terrible blow. Neither I nor Malinin had the faintest idea what drones looked like. Yet we were going to turn ourselves into them.

The retransformation, then, couldn't take place? It would have to be cancelled? But how could IT take place, Barankin, when you have no idea what the THING you want to transform INTO looks like!

What a pity I had been busy doing something else at that lesson! Ah, Barankin, Barankin! You should have been listening to the teacher and not inventing a new language!

"Dro . . . dro . . . dro. . ." Malinin began muttering all of a sudden. "I remember now. . . . L'il bees . . . with wi . . . with wi. . . ."

At this point Malinin began to sway oddly and to roll over on to his side.

"With wi. . . with wi. . . with wings!" I cried. "That's right, Malinin!"

I remembered, too, now. I remembered the drawing of drones hanging on the blackboard in our class-room. They were bees, little bees of our male sex, as they say, with small transparent wings.

That's it! Now, at last, we could have a real good rest, Kostya and I! We'd take a rest from everything in the world. All my hopes, all my enthusiasm and even my wasted strength returned to me.

"Malinin, get up!" I shouted to Kostya. "This is no time for lying about! We've got work to do!" I said, meaning by the word "work" that one and only job that had any rhyme or reason in it, namely, transforming ourselves into drones.

"Come on, Malinin, get up!" I yelled in a voice not like my own. I was all agog with excitement and eagerness to swell the ranks of the world's drones with my own and Kostya's persons.

My excited cries, however, seemed to have no effect whatever on Kostya.

He lay on his side and muttered something in reply, but I could not make out a single word.

"What did you say?" I asked him.

"Z-z-z-z!" said Kostya.

"Kostya, what's the matter with you?" I shouted at Malinin with all my might and started shaking him by the leg. "What's this? Are you pretending to be asleep, or what? So you don't want to transform into drones? All right, a fat lot I care! I'll do it by myself!"

"Z-z-z-z!" said Malinin, and began muttering such nonsense that the thing dawned on me at last: Kostya was not pretending, he *was* sleeping!

Kostya Malinin was sleeping! He had fallen asleep. Fallen asleep at the very moment of recollecting what drones were! Fallen asleep at such a time! Just when we had to retransform! Fallen asleep according to all the terrible rules and laws of Nature. Fallen asleep without even warning me. And who, if not he, had said that this "law" did not apply to us humanoid butterflies? And now there he was sleeping like that Sleeping Beauty whom the sparrow had gobbled up. Luckily there were no sparrows about. Not yet, anyway. It wouldn't take long for one to appear, though. I had to wake Kostya up, and be quick about it, before those accursed sparrows popped up.

I shook Kostya by the leg, jostled him, pulled his wings, but it was no use—Kostya Malinin was fast asleep.

I began to get scared.

"Kostya!" I yelled. "Wake up! D'you hear, wake up this minute! I'll make out with you for life if you don't."

"Z-z-z-z!" said Kostya.

"If he's fallen asleep like a human, I'll wake him, of course," I said to myself. "But if he's fallen asleep like a butterfly, right up to the spring, and by time-table at that, then I shall wake him all the same. But I must wake him, I must! I must . . . I must what? What must I do? I've got it! I must splash some water over him."

I flew to the puddle and began to suck some water up through my proboscis when I heard the voices of our class-mates approaching us from behind some bushes.

EVENT TWENTY-FIVE

THEY HAVE A "BUTTERFLY" LIKE ME IN THEIR COLLECTION

"It isn't fair!" Kostya Semyonov was saying as he emerged from behind a bush. "We here are working while Barankin and Malinin are watching a movie somewhere."

They all kicked up a row, and I thought to myself: "I'd like you all to see the movie Kostya and I have seen!"

"Semyonov is quite right," Vera Bolshova said. "If we've got to work let's work all together, or let's do nothing all together."

"Barankin and Malinin have sneaked away, and Smirnov and Penkin haven't come at all!" said Kostya Semyonov.

"What a nuisance having them here, now of all times," I thought, hiding behind a tuft of grass. "I wonder how long they are going to hang around."

"That Barankin ought to be kicked out of the school, I say!" Era shouted in a voice not like her own. "How long are we going to mess about with him?"

"Where are you going to kick him out? Into the street?" Fokina said.

"Why into the street?" answered Kuzyakina. "Transfer him to School 315."

"Why School 315?" Semyonov asked.

"Because we're competing with that school. If Barankin gets bad marks there, all the better for us."

"So you propose, Era, that we should transfer Yura's bad marks to another school?" Fokina said. "And what are we to do with Barankin himself?"

"All right, you figure it out, and we'll go and have a drink of lemonade." said Kostya Semyonov.

"I'm sick and tired of all this talk about Barankin," added Valya Cherevatkin. "Come along."

"Members of the Nature Lovers' circle please remain!" said Fokina.

The boys went away, and the girls squatted on the grass patch around Zina Fokina, giggling and talking among themselves.

"Quiet girls!" Zina Fokina said, opening a fat book. "Attention please. The subject of today's talk is—"

"Butterflies! Butterflies!" the girls squealed all together, waving their butterfly-nets about.

"Quite right—butterflies," Zina confirmed and began thumbing the pages of the book.

Butterflies? What could this mean? It meant . . . that Kostya and I were the subject of today's talk. This was the limit. I almost choked with the water I had been going to splash Kostya Malinin with. Well, I never! Now I understood why those Nature Lovers had brought those nets along with them. It was to catch us, butterflies. In that case it would simply be dangerous to waken Kostya. I let the water out. If he woke up and started flapping his wings, those girls would grab him in less than no time. What was I to do with him? There was a problem for you! Maybe I ought to hide him? There was a scrap of newspaper over there I could cover him up with it. I seized the scrap of newspaper and began dragging it towards Kostya Malinin.

Zina Fokina adjusted her spectacles, cleared her throat and began reading in the dreariest voice you can imagine: " 'Butterflies are one of the most interesting phenomena in the insect world. . . .' "

I stopped for a minute to have a rest, and then with renewed energy began towing the bit of newspaper across the path (the most dangerous spot of all! They might see me there!) When I had dragged the paper across the path I crept into the grass and had a look round. Everything seemed to be in order. Kostya Malinin was fast asleep, snoring away as if nothing had happened. The girls were sitting quiet. Fokina went on mumbling: " 'Butterflies are also important for man's economic activity. . . .' "

"Oh, Zina! A butterfly! A butterfly!" one of the Nature Lovers suddenly shrieked at the top of her voice.

I turned at the sound and froze in my tracks.

"Where? Where's the butterfly? What butterfly?" all the girls started jabbering at once.

"Over there. In the grass, next to the puddle. Don't you see it?"

Zina Fokina shut the book, fastened her eyes on the grass and pricked up her ears like a sleuth-hound. I broke out into a cold sweat of fear.

"It's all over," the thought flashed through my mind. "They've spotted one of us. But which one? Me or Kostya? I do wish it isn't Kostya!"

There was a silence. I stood like an idiot next to the scrap of newspaper, wiping the perspiration from my brow with a foot and goggling at the girls. It seemed to me that they were all looking at Kostya Malinin, and I was standing like a fool gaping at them (what else could I do?).

"Well, yes," said Fokina, adjusting her spectacles and staring in my direction. "A common cabbage butterfly. Take no notice, girls. We have one like that in our collection." She buried her nose again in the book, and I was so glad that I even got wild.

"They have one like me in their collection! Like fun they have! Don't you believe it!"

I made a long nose at the girls with my foot. After what Fokina had said, they lost all interest in me. At the moment that suited me perfectly. I'd screen Kostya from the eyes of the girls with the scrap of newspaper before you could count two.

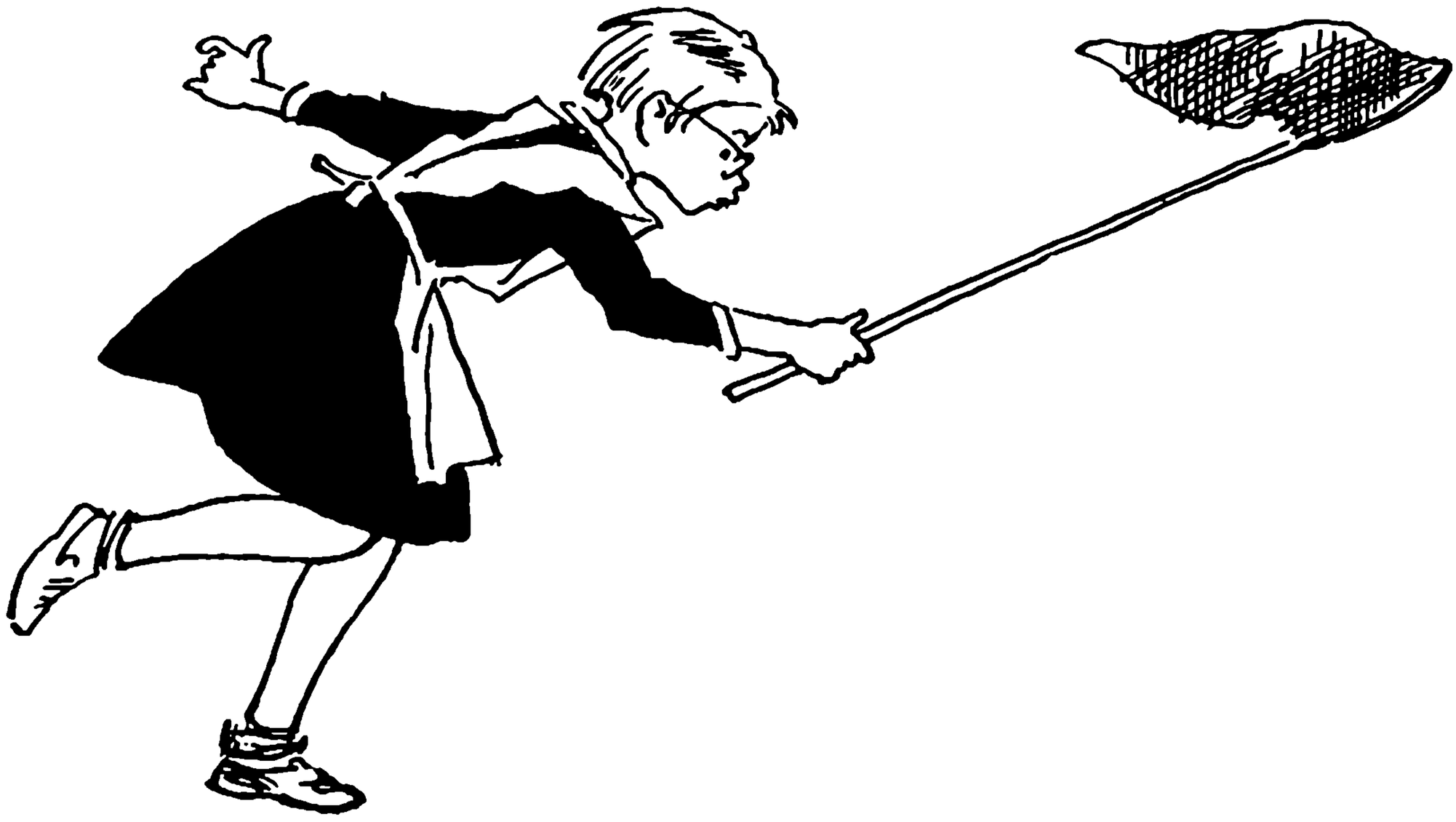
At the count "one", I dragged the paper up to Kostya, at "two" I started to lift it on its edge, but a wind, which sprang up from God knows where, tore the paper out of my feet and blew it across the grass.

"Oh, Zina!" one of the Nature Lovers shrieked as if a snake had bitten her. "Look at that butterfly! I don't think we have one like that in our collection."

"Now girls, don't let your attention wander!" Fokina said displeased. She tore her eyes away from the book and stopped speechless, staring goggle-eyed. "What's this?" she whispered in a frightened tone. "It can't be! Oh, girls, I must be sleeping! Pinch me, somebody! Why, this is a Machaon! A real Papilio Machaon from the Ussuri region. What's it doing here? A Machaon in our town? Amazing! Unique! Subject for a scientific paper!"

While muttering these words Fokina quietly took a net from one of the girls, got up, made one step forward and stood stock-still on one leg.

And so, the worst had happened. The Nature Lovers' circle headed by Zina Fokina had spotted the sleeping Machaon—I mean the sleeping



Kostya Malinin, of course—and now my best friend was threatened with what was perhaps the deadliest of all the dangers that had threatened us all this time.

"Listen, girls!" Fokina whispered to the dumbfounded Nature Lovers. "Surround it quietly. Don't make a noise. I'll catch it myself."

Silently, with butterfly-nets at the ready, the girls started surrounding the sleeping Malinin, whom they took for a Papilio Machaon, which had come here, by some miracle, all the way from the remote Ussuri region.

EVENT TWENTY-SIX

INTO KILL-BOX WITH IT!

"We'll catch it!" Fokina hissed, swaying on one leg, fearing lest Kostya should be frightened away. "We'll catch it, then into the kill-box with it. Then we'll dry it and flatten it."

"Z-z-z-z!" I could hear Malinin snoring sweetly.

Kostya slept, little suspecting what a horrible death our class monitor was preparing for him. There was not a minute, not a second, to be lost.

The more so since the boys, returned from the street, had joined Zina Fokina and expressed a fervent desire to catch Kostya Malinin, that's to say, the Machaon, and put him into the kill-box. Venka Smirnov and

Genka Koromyslov, who had come along with the boys, also decided to take part in the terrible business. Venka elbowed his way through the bunch of the girls, glanced at Kostya Malinin and bawled: "Why, this is the fellow Genka and I were chasing in the street only a minute ago!"

Instead of telling Smirnov and Koromyslov off for being late for the tree planting, Zina Fokina only hissed Venka into silence, while the girls, taking advantage of all the excitement, pressed the boys back into the bushes and began carefully closing the ring of death around Kostya Malinin.

Something had to be done! And done quickly!

I fluttered up out of the grass and flew at Zina Fokina, circling round her right ear and begging her to leave Kostya alone.

"Zina, O, Zina!" I shouted. "Stop! This isn't a butterfly! It's a human being in the shape of a butterfly. This is not a Machaon. It's Malinin!"

But Zina waved me off like a pestering fly.

"Girls! What are you doing!" I screamed at the top of my voice.

But they seemed to have gone deaf and blind. I might not have existed in the world for all the notice they took of me.

The sinister circle closed in around Kostya Malinin.

I rushed about, then flew upward. There was nothing for it but to jolt the sleeping Malinin awake by using battering-ram tactics. Maybe a blow would bring him awake. Folding my wings, I swooped down, glided over the grass and butted Kostya hard in the ribs. The shock made me see stars and rainbows, and Kostya was knocked off the stone on which he had been sitting. He leapt to his feet, flew into the air and woke up, rolling his eyes like mad.

"Kostya! Do an upward spin! Take off!" I yelled in a voice not like my own.

"What spin?" Kostya Malinin said blankly, rubbing his sleepy eyes.

At that I grabbed hold of his leg and dragged him into a climbing take-off with me. I wonder where I got the strength to do it! In a second I had hoisted Kostya Malinin above the bushes, like in a lift.

Down below the girls squealed like mad.

"What's it—playtime?" Kostya said sleepily, and shut his eyes again.

"Playtime your grandmother!" I said and gave him a kick from behind to bring him to his senses. I was still seeing stars, a whole skyful of 'em. "What's the matter, haven't you woken up yet?"

"Just a minute!" Malinin said. "In a minute I'll get some nectar outside and sit down to my geometry. That fellow Misha ought to have his wings pulled off. . . ."

"What Misha?"

"Yakovlev . . . of the family of topnotchers. That'll teach him to agree to help us with our lessons on a Sunday. . . ."

Malinin was going to say something more, when suddenly he stopped beating his wings, gave a loud snore and began dropping towards the bushes.

"Kostya! Don't fall asleep, whatever you do!" I roared and followed him down among the lilac bushes, my wings catching at twigs and leaves as I fell.

Kostya dropped on to a twig and was jolted out of his sleep again. Ants were scurrying backwards and forwards along the twig. They darted about right under my feet, and I had to give two of them a smart kick for being in people's way at such a critical moment.

"Turn into a drone at once, d'you hear!" I said to Kostya, driving the ants out of the way.

"Drone? What drone? You're dotty, Barankin!" Malinin said, rolling over on to his side.

Probably everything was a mishmash in Malinin's sleepy head and he was incapable of grasping anything in that state. I pulled him up by his wings.

"Turn yourself into a drone, Malinin! D'you hear!"

"How can a man turn himself into a drone I'd like to know. You're a sap . . . Barankin . . . of the homo dreamers—I mean, you're a homo sap . . . oh, I want to sleep," Malinin said, and rolled over on the other side.

The girls could still be heard dashing about the garden, squealing and shrieking. If they noticed Kostya-Machaon's bright wings in the bushes, we were done for.

"Will you turn into a drone or not? I'm asking you for the last time!" I lifted him up again, managing at the same time to land a back-leg kick at two cheeky ants who showed an intention of crawling right under my belly.

"All right, Barankin," Kostya muttered. "Anything to oblige. . . . But first I'll have a nap."

"No you won't! You'll turn into a drone first, and then have your nap. Now listen to my command!" I seized Kostya's feet and began to shake him with all my might, saying: "Repeat after me! Repeat after me!"

Not by night, nor by day,
Do I want to be a moth!
I'll be a drone, I say,
As happy as can be!

"Here it is!" Zina Fokina screeched. "I knew it couldn't fly off far. Come on girls! Surround the bush!"

"It's all up with us! They've spotted us. We're done for!" I thought. "And Malinin has fallen asleep again, and there's nothing more I can do about it."

At the mere thought of it my wings drooped and I didn't even bother to kick the ants away as they came crawling up from all sides.

"I don't care, let 'em crawl," I said to myself. "It's all one to me now."

And suddenly, at that moment, I heard Kostya Malinin laughing.

I looked at him, horrified. My first thought was that all this emotional stress had driven him mad. And then I saw two ants crawling about near his belly and tickling him with their feelers. So that's what it was! They were tickling him and he was laughing—laughing softly, it's true, but still, laughing in his sleep. What a chump I was! How could I have forgotten that Kostya Malinin was terribly ticklish. There was nothing in the world he feared more than being tickled. In summer camp I used to wake him very often by tickling him. Good for these ants, who gave me the idea. Without losing a moment I began to tickle Kostya under the arm-pits with all my four legs. Kostya-Machaon's little giggle instantly became a guffaw and he woke up. Woke up in an instant. Opened his eyes and stopped sleeping.

He shook with laughter, held his sides and gasped helplessly:

"Oh, Barankin! Ha! Ha! Stop tickling! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" I retorted.

I couldn't help laughing either. For one thing it was nerves, for another I was so overjoyed that Kostya had awakened from that terrible sleep and come to himself at last. What with this nervous joy, I quite forgot for the moment the deadly danger that still threatened Kostya Malinin. To be on the safe side I still continued to tickle Kostya, although he was awake. You could never tell. If you stopped tickling he might go and fall asleep again.

"Oh, stop it!" Kostya said to me and the ants, pushing me and them away from him. "Ha! Ha! What's all that noise about? Ha! Ha! Ha!"

I had clean forgotten the danger that threatened my best friend, and this reminder made me realise with horror that Zina and the girls, to judge by their voices, were beginning to surround our bush.

"Malinin!" I yelled at Kostya. "Concentrate this very minute and begin to transform into a drone!"

"A drone? What drone? Why a drone?" Kostya said, stretching luxuriously.

"Because that girl Zina Fokina and her Nature Lovers are after you. They want a Machaon. They'll put you into a kill-box, then they'll dry you, then flatten you!"

"Kill-box? Dry me? What for?" roared Malinin.

"For their collection!" I roared.

At the word "collection" Malinin became wide awake in an instant, and the full horror of our position dawned on him in a flash. I should think so too! Kostya knew only too well what a collection was, as he had been a Nature Lover himself once and had had such a collection himself like the one Zina Fokina wanted to put him into.

"Why didn't you wake me up before?"

"I like that! If it hadn't been for me you'd still be snoring. The ants gave me the idea. Anyway, hurry up now and repeat the magic words after me!"

I began shouting the words into Malinin's ear, but soon I became aware that he wasn't listening to me at all. That word "collection" must have knocked him all of a heap, and he couldn't understand what I wanted of him.

I yelled at the top of my voice:

I'll be a drone, I say,
As happy as a sloth!

Malinin was silent, then all of a sudden he burst out:

Oo, mummy!
I don't want to be a butterfly!
A butterfly's no good!
I want to be an ant!

For the moment I didn't realise that Malinin and I were beginning to turn into different insects and that our ways were parting, as the saying

goes. I was for becoming a drone, and Malinin wanted to throw in his lot with the ants. The man was crazy! Didn't he realise what he was letting himself in for? If you ask me, he didn't realise anything at that moment. The only thing he grasped was that it was better to be a live toiling ant than a dead butterfly.

Now, I ask you—could I leave Malinin in the lurch in such a situation? Could I become the desirable drone and allow Malinin to turn into a toiling ant? Of course not! Was I or was I not responsible for Malinin? Of course I was, and how! Who, if not me, had got him into this mess, this transformation business?

At that moment, to crown all, a stamp of feet, like so many horses, could be heard behind the bushes. There was a snapping of twigs. Butterfly-nets of different colours were waving in the air, and some girls had even climbed up a tree with their nets, thus cutting off our last avenue of retreat.

Ah, well! There was nothing left for me but to fill my lungs with all the air they could take and put my last ounce of strength into the incantation which Malinin, the crazyboots, had thought up in the excitement of the moment.

Oo, mummy!
I don't want to be a butterfly!

I gabbled, repeating Kostya's words—

I'm sure it's very good
To be an ant in this world!

Dear me, I wasn't so sure of it at all! Malinin, what are we doing, Malinin? Why, oh why, are we turning ourselves into ants?

This was the last thought that flashed through my tortured butterfly head, which was splitting with worries, cares, anxieties and fears. . . .

PART FOUR

HELP! THE MYRMICKS!

(The Death of Malinin)

EVENT TWENTY-SEVEN

ZINA FOKINA IS WORSTED, KOSTYA AND I ARE SAVED

"Zina!" one of the girls behind the bush hissed. "If the cabbager flies out what shall we do with it?"

By "cabbager" the girls, of course, meant me, Barankin. Therefore the question sounded to me like this: "Zina, if Yuri Barankin flies out, what shall we do with him?"

"We'll put him into the kill-box, then we'll dry him, then flatten him!" answered Zina Fokina. "We'll keep the Machaon as an exhibit, and I'll use the cabbager to teach you how to handle the flattener."

"It's come to this, Barankin!" I said to myself, listening to the sounds that reached me from behind the bush. To all appearances the final preparations were being made for the assault on the lilac bush. There was a clink of bottles, a rustle of boxes for packing away butterflies, the sounds of sinister questions and still more sinister answers.

"Zina, what if the Machaon gets caught in the net—can we take it by its wings?"

"Under no circumstances! The wings must not be rubbed. Get the kill-boxes ready! Nina, have you got the pins?"

"Yes."

"Get them out!"

"Oo, I'm scared!"

"Katya, you take the pins! Zoya, keep a look-out!"

"It's what I'm doing."

"All ready?"

"Yes-s-s-s!" the girls hissed like so many snakes.

"Open the kill-boxes!"

The kill-boxes were opened. A smell of tobacco filled the air. Someone sneezed loudly. Someone said: "Oo, I'm scared!" One of the girls got

stung by a nettle and cried out. They all hissed at her. There came a crackle of twigs being carefully parted. Questions:

"Where are they?"

"There they are!"

"Where? I don't see them. Is that them on the lower branch?"

"No! Higher up."

"Higher?"

"Lower!"

"Still lower! To the right. Now left. See that dry leaf? Next to it two butterflies!"

"Oo, girls, so there are!"

"Shut up, you!"

The rustle of parted branches grew louder and Zina Fokina's flushed face, covered with scratches and cobwebs, appeared among the thickets of the lilac bush. Her eyes darted like mad over the foliage.

"Well, what is it, what is it?" the girls hissed from all sides.

"There's nothing here," Zina Fokina said in a flustered voice. "Nothing at all!"

Of course, if Zina Fokina had looked more carefully at the spot where she herself only a minute ago had seen two butterflies, she would have noticed two black little ants clinging to the rough bark of the lilac with all six legs. But ants were farthest from Zina Fokina's thoughts just then. She swept the branches again with a saddened eye, drew a deep sigh and said:

"They've gone. Vanished into thin air!"

"Who said vanished? And what are we?" one ant whispered to the other.

The blue-eyed ant chuckled, twitched his feelers and slapped the other ant, a dark-eyed one, on the back with one of his feet.

The dark-eyed ant looked at Zina Fokina's crestfallen face and twitched *his* feelers, but did not say anything.

"I can't believe it!" Zina Fokina whispered. "I saw them with my own eyes. They couldn't have dropped through the earth!" She searched the whole bush again with enormous tearful eyes and said: "Dash it all! Dash it all!"

"She's swearing!" the blue-eyed ant cried, delighted (it was Kostya Malinin, of course. Cheerio!). "She's swearing!" he said, rubbing his legs together. "Zina Fokina swearing—can you beat that!"

"There's nothing here," Zina Fokina said in a flustered voice. "Nothing at all!"

Kostya twirled his feelers like a moustache, slapped the black-eyed ant heartily on the back (that was me, Barankin, of course. Cheerio from me too!) and became convulsed with soundless laughter.

Zina Fokina stepped back. The branches closed with a swish, and Kostya and I were left alone on the swinging twig of the lilac bush.

"Hooray!" Kostya Malinin said. "The air raid alarm is over. All clear!"

Kostya Malinin rejoiced. He rejoiced like a human, that is, he rejoiced like an ant who had escaped death by the skin of his teeth while still a butterfly.

Although I, too, like Kostya, had been in mortal danger from which I had been saved by timely transformation into an ant, I was none too glad, however. If we managed to turn ourselves into ants we could just as well have turned into drones. I expected nothing good from ant life, from what I knew of it, and so I didn't share Kostya's delight. I said gloomily:

"Ugh, Malinin! What have you done, Malinin!"

"Why, what have I done?" Malinin answered cheerfully. "It wasn't as if I fell asleep of my own free will! It's a law of Nature."

"I'm not talking about the law of Nature. I'm saying—because of you we went and turned ourselves into ants instead of drones."

"If you were faced with the prospect of going into a collection you wouldn't pick and choose what to turn yourself into."

I didn't say anything to that. There was something in what Malinin said.

"In any case, Barankin," Kostya went on, "drones are something like ants, only they have wings. You and I have no use for wings, we've had enough flying about on wings. Better let's crawl away from everything in the world under the earth, into an ant-heap. At least there, under the ground, we shan't meet any of those Nature Lovers, topnotchers, cats or sparrows."

"I can see you hiding in an ant-heap!" I jumped down Malinin's throat. His stupid talk simply made me furious. "Don't you know that ants are the most hard-working insects in the world? And that—what d'you call it—Instinct, makes them work every day?"

"Who told you I don't know!" Malinin answered. "I know very well that ants are hard workers. But today is Sunday."

Such a statement coming from Kostya Malinin surprised me.

"What's Sunday got to do with it?" I said, taken aback.

"I don't suppose they work on Sundays!"

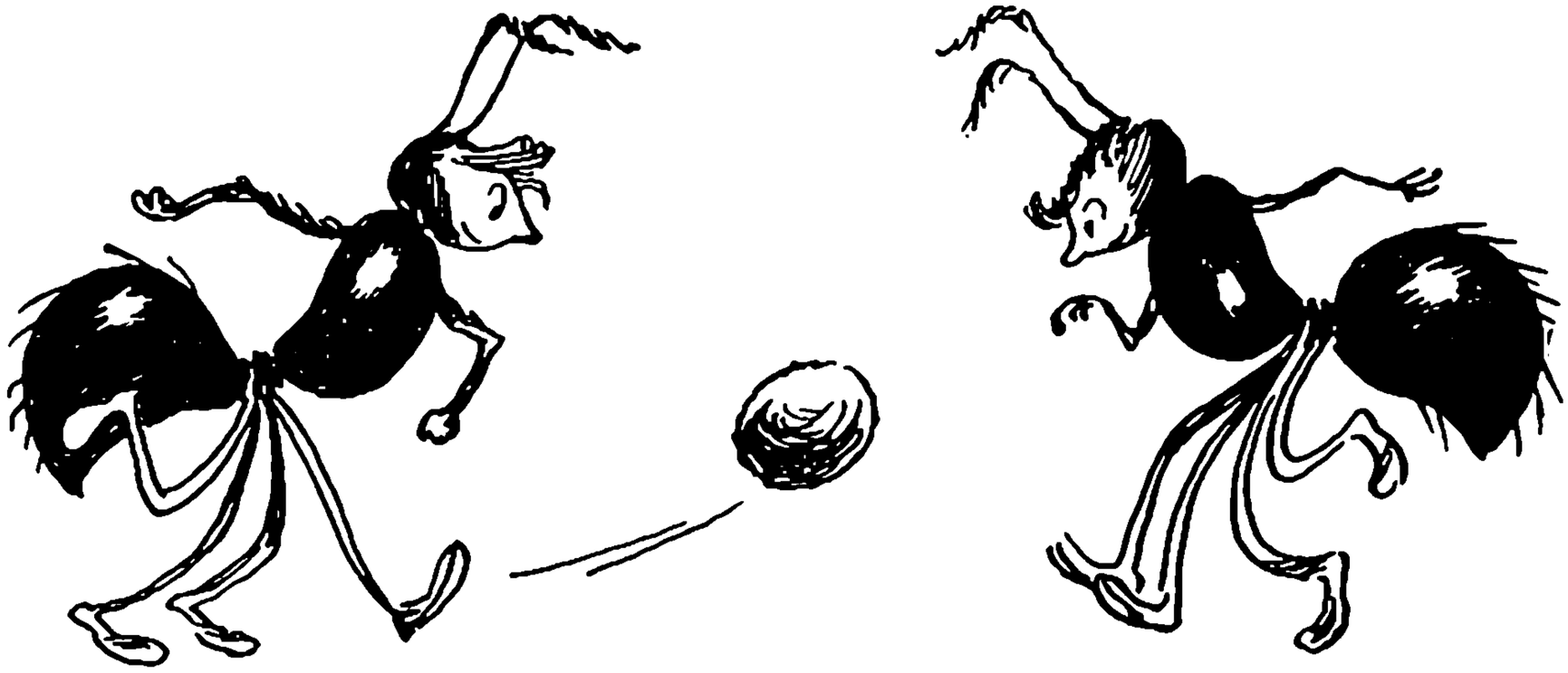
"According to you, then, Instinct doesn't apply to ants on Sundays, is that it?"

"I tell you what, Barankin," Malinin said in a voice that carried conviction. "I don't believe Instinct exists at all."

"Doesn't exist?" I said, taken aback again. "But they teach us that at school. don't they?"

"What if they do? The teachers have simply invented Instinct so's to be able to ask us questions at lesson time. Don't you see it?"

Now that he mentioned it, I began to think Kostya was right, and there was no such thing as Instinct among the ants, and that they did have a day of rest. And if they did, then we hadn't done so bad in turning into ants instead of drones. Why of course, ants had a day off! But what if they



didn't though? I tried to picture life without any days off and just couldn't. I thought of the talk the doctor had had with us at school. He had said it was very important for everyone to have a rest every Sunday. And if it was important for people to rest on Sundays it was all the more important for ants—they were such puny, teeny-weeny things. Of course ants had their day of rest, they had to have it! And if so, then everything was fine. There was nothing to worry about, and we could run off to the ant-heap and occupy a separate room there, and start walking on our heads and just do whatever we pleased. The thought bucked me up immensely.

"Malinin!" I said, jumping off the twig on to the ground. "We're going to look for an ant-heap, you and I, occupy a separate room there, lock ourselves in, and. . . ."

"I don't suppose they have any doors or locks to their rooms," Kostya said doubtfully.

"That doesn't matter!" I said, getting still jollier. "What matters is that they have rooms, and we'll find a way of shutting out the world! You and I are wise old birds and crafty butterflies, we're not to be caught with chaff!"

I ran along the ground in a frolicsome mood and took a running kick at a round little seed, resembling a ball, that lay in my path.

Kostya Malinin caught the ball on his toe and passed it back to me. Only here, on the ground, was I able to get a good look at Kostya-Ant. He was all shiny, as if he had been brushed up with boot polish, and he had the funniest of waists, slim as a girl's, and six legs. "Jolly good idea, an ant having six legs," I thought. "Good for playing football. Especially when it comes to a six-legger goal kick. Handy for the goalkeeper too—he can stand on two legs and use the other four to catch the ball with."

To put this thought to the test I sprang into the air and caught the seed-ball deftly on my chest with all four legs at once. Hugging the ball I fell to the ground and rolled over, laughing loudly with sheer pleasure.

"Houp-la!" Kostya Malinin shouted, rolling on top of me.

We started tumbling about, when suddenly I saw six chaps, six ants, coming towards us out of the forest, that's to say, out of the grass. I was very glad, of course. I jumped up.

"Hullo, boys!" I shouted, raising all four legs in greeting. Then I kicked the ball and said: "What about a game of football, boys, for a Sunday pastime? How many of you are there? Six? And we're two. Just the right number. Two teams, four in each. I'll be centre forward."

The real ants looked at me rather oddly, touched each other with their feelers, whispered among themselves, then backed away and quietly disappeared in the grass thickets.

Kostya and I ran after them, but there was no sign of them in the forest—in the grass, I mean. But close by, under a hillside, we came upon a path which was full of bustle and ant movement.

Ants scurried back and forth. The smaller ones carried bits of earth, little twigs, leaves and pine needles. Others, broad-shouldered ants with big heads and huge jaws, dragged along caterpillars, dead flies and beetles.

"What's this, Malinin?" I asked Malinin suspiciously. "They're not working, are they?"

"Goodness, no, Barankin!" Malinin answered. "They're taking a stroll along their main street."

"Taking a stroll?" I said incredulously.

"Why, yes. It's Sunday today."

"Then why are they lugging all those logs and stones on their backs if it's Sunday today?"

Malinin didn't answer.

"It looks to me as if they're working, not strolling."

"Don't be silly, Barankin. How can they be working on a Sunday?"

"What about those logs on their shoulders?" I said to Malinin.

"The logs. . ." said Malinin. "Oh, it's a custom with them to take a stroll with logs on their shoulders."

"A custom?" I queried. Rubbing my eyes with my feet, I stared hard at the ants, and my heart sank with a sudden gloomy foreboding.

I got this feeling both from what I had seen and from the phrase that Malinin had uttered as he looked at the ant-heap.

"I tell you what, Barankin," Kostya said. "Don't let's go to the ant-heap, let's better go for a walk by ourselves, somewhere over there." Kostya waved a leg in the direction exactly opposite to where the ant-heap was.

As a matter of fact, I was going to propose this to Kostya myself and he had simply forestalled me with the same proposal. Therefore I didn't hesitate a second and said:

"Right-o, Malinin! Let's get out of this. Let's get going."

"While the going's good," I wanted to add, but I didn't.

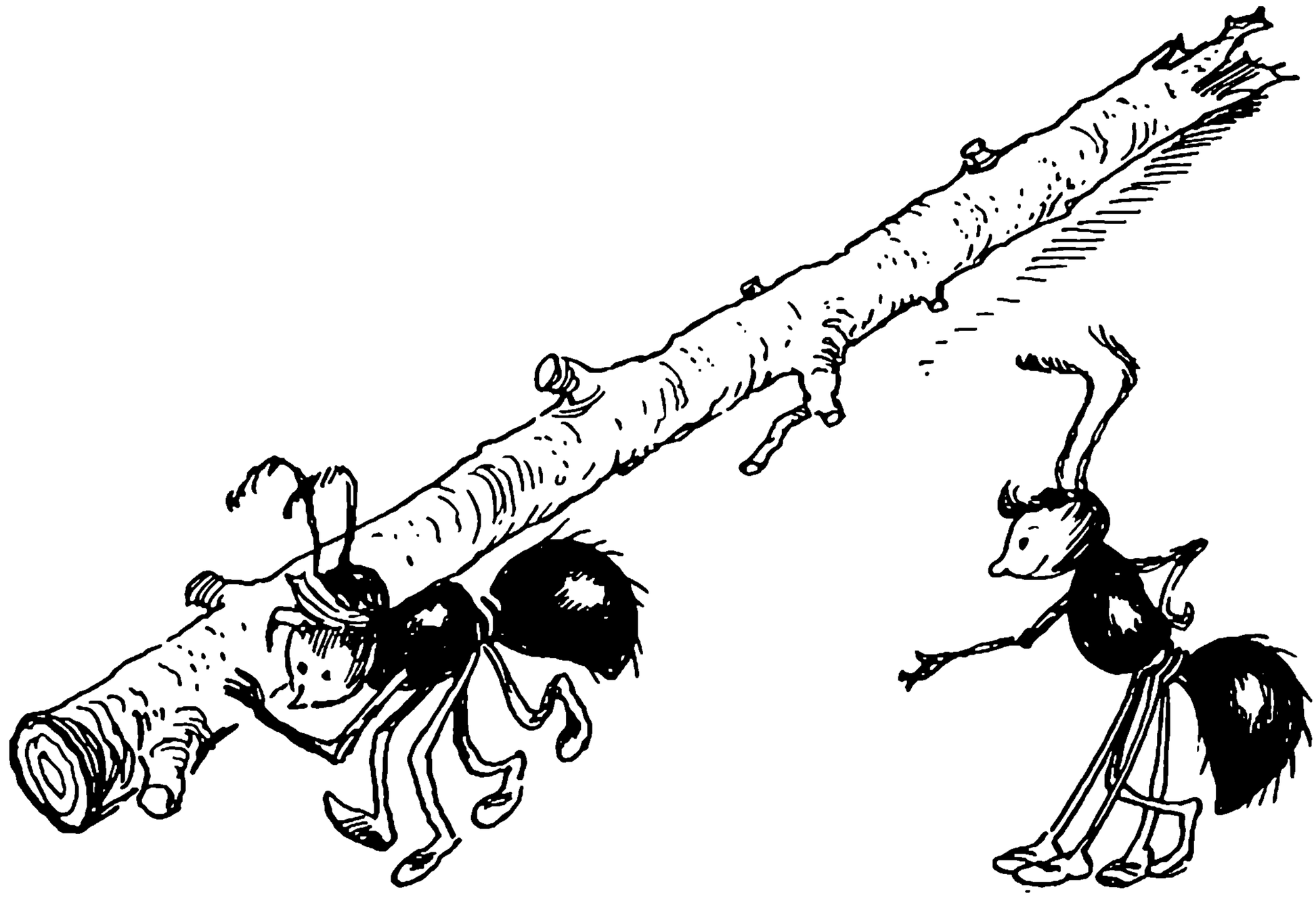
We wanted to back away from the ant-heap, but a strange thing happened to both of us. Instead of moving backwards we started moving forwards, straight towards the ant-heap. I could clearly feel myself doing this against my will, and I realised I couldn't help myself. Some strange force was slowly, step by step, drawing Kostya and me nearer and nearer to the ant-heap.

EVENT TWENTY-EIGHT

WE REPAIR THE ANT-HEAP

Slowly, reluctantly, against our will, Kostya and I found ourselves approaching the scurrying ants, and with every step I saw more and more clearly that all the ants, every man jack of them, were busy doing something, although this was a day of rest for all people.

The ants were working, labouring, toiling—there was no doubt about that. Imperceptibly, we found ourselves in the thick of the ant crowd, so near that we could hear them puffing loudly beneath their loads. Right next to us, for instance, a whole team was lugging home a gigantic



dragon-fly. And though the ants in that team fussed about like so many girls, getting into each other's way, and pulling that dragon-fly different ways, the dragon-fly, nevertheless by some miracle or other, moved in the direction of the ant-heap.

"The ants are working!" I said to Kostya Malinin.

And so they were—every single one of them was working. Nobody shirked his job, nobody wasted time, doing something he shouldn't be doing—talking, playing or lying about in the grass taking a sun bath. What's more, nobody was giving orders, nobody was yelling at anybody like that Zina Fokina of ours. You should hear the noise she makes whenever we do some voluntary work out of school hours!

"They're working!" I said to Kostya Malinin.

"So what!" Kostya snapped. "A bunch of ignoramuses, that's why. Uneducated lot. I bet you they don't even know what Sunday is. But you and I are educated. You and I are not going to work."

"Instinct, then, does exist," I said in a very grave tone. "Once they obey it, then IT does exist!"

"Let them obey it, if they want, who cares! We're not going to obey anybody!" Kostya Malinin said obstinately.

I, too, generally speaking, was absolutely convinced that Instinct didn't necessarily have to be obeyed, even if it did exist. Imagine my surprise, therefore, when, coming out on to the ant path, I suddenly felt a strong desire to set to work along with all those ignorant and uneducated ants. The desire was simply irresistible. It seemed to me that if I didn't swing some load on to my back and start working the way all those ants were doing I would die on the spot. Picking a dry twig up from the ground I heaved it up on to my shoulder and dragged it towards the ant-heap. The moment I did so I felt as though a load was taken off my mind! I even enjoyed it and felt sort of gay. The same thing happened to Kostya Malinin—I mean, when he saw me shouldering that twig he stared at me as if I was nutty, and then all of a sudden he seized the twig at the other end with a burst of energy and zeal, and started to help me without saying a word, falling and stumbling at every step. The twig was pretty heavy, like a real log, and it kept catching in the grass and bumping into stones and rolling off our shoulders, but we hung on to it, puffing and dragging it along with great pleasure until we hauled it right up to the underground entrance of the ant-heap. There, at the entrance, two ants took the log from us and carried it off into the darkness, and Kostya and I obediently turned back and ran off to fetch some more building materials.

So there you are. That's how Kostya and I joined the "strolling" ants and took a "stroll" together with them, carrying all kinds of rubbish on our shoulders and journeying back and forth, back and forth, to and from the ant-heap. We staggered along with twigs, with pine needles, with dry leaves, with bits of earth. We ran without a stop, going full blast, too busy even to speak to each other. Frankly, this kind of work, guided by Instinct, was not very interesting. If anything, it was silly, I should say. All the time you feel a single phrase drilling your brain: "Come on, Barankin! Keep at it, Barankin! Go it, Barankin! Drag away, pull away, haul away, heave away, Barankin!" But WHY you have to haul away, WHAT FOR—you have no idea. Something prevents you from thinking it out, and it makes you feel a blessed fool, not to say an imbecile. Only once did a gleam of light strike me, when, fed up with dragging logs about on my shoulder, I swiftly fixed up a sort of hand barrow for Kostya and me, but that stupid sensation did not leave me, and the phrase: "Go it, Barankin! Drag away, haul away, heave away, Barankin!" continued to drill my brain.

The second gleam of light came just as I was going to ask Malinin (seeing that it was he who had dragged me into this ant business) how long more this accursed Instinct was to keep us on the go. I recollected with great difficulty that I had only recently read a book called *The Password of Crossed Feelers* which stated in black and white that Instinct keeps the ants at work until the sun goes down, right down.

Who knows, maybe Kostya and I would have got used to that ant conveyor that day and would have worked till sunset if not for an incident that occurred on our twentieth or thirtieth barrow delivery to the ant-heap. It was just at that time that Venka Smirnov was passing by our (our!) ant-heap. Nothing good could be expected from that, of course. I had no sooner thought of this than Venka, whistling to himself, poked his spade once or twice into the ant-heap and whistled himself off.

You should have seen what happened to us! By "us" I don't mean only Kostya and me, but all the ants. All of us as one man, as if at a command, simply went haywire! Gosh, did we dash about, did we go to it like mad, working to repair our common ant home. It was as if Instinct, through that Venka Smirnov, had gone and switched us all over from low gear into high gear, and so we started working ten times as hard and fast.

When this dawned on me, I felt like fetching Malinin one over the nob with my barrow, but I couldn't do it even if I wanted to because Malinin, for one thing, was at the other end of the barrow holding the handles, and for another, the phrase: "Come on, Barankin! Go it, Barankin! Drag away, haul away, heave away, Barankin!" was drilling my brain with tenfold energy. Besides, however cross I may be with Kostya, I can never as much as touch him with a finger, leave alone hit him.

After all, wasn't he dashing about together with me in top gear, and wasn't his poor brain, too, being drilled by that accursed phrase: "Come on, Malinin! Go it, Malinin! Drag away, haul away, heave away, Malinin!"?

EVENT TWENTY-NINE

PROBABLY THE ONLY "REVOLT" OF ITS KIND IN THE WORLD

All was lost! All! All my hopes, my dreams and fantasies lay in ruins! I realised now once and for all that the kind of life I had dreamt of, sitting on the bench waiting for Misha Yakovlev, did not exist, and could not exist anywhere on earth—either above ground or under it. Sparrows didn't have it, butterflies didn't have it and ants didn't have it. Nor, for

that matter, did drones. And the state in which a person could do nothing probably didn't exist either, because if Kostya and I had even been drones now instead of ants, we'd have tried to wangle things so as not to do anything, but I found that in order not to do anything you usually have to do such a lot that it were better to do something than to try to do nothing. There was no such life. And there was no need to look for it. Just a waste of time. I-T did not exist! That being the case, why did I and my best pal Kostya Malinin still continue to be ants? Why were we working in top gear to repair an ant-heap we had no intention of living in? Why were we sweating like cart-horses, stumbling with fatigue at every step? Enough! It was time we went back, before something terrible and unforeseen happened. It was as much as your life was worth, living with these birds and insects. I looked back at Kostya Malinin. Malinin was silent. He asked me nothing, he didn't grumble at me for getting him into such a scrape for the third time, he didn't curse or swear at me. I'd have felt much better if he had. But Kostya kept mum, you'd think he had his mouth full of water. He was busy as can be, loading up and unloading again and again, hauling and carrying, and he didn't lag a single step behind me. Kostya was working like a real ant.

"This has got to stop!" I said to myself. "We must throw up work immediately and stop. We've got to save up our strength for our return, otherwise this Instinct business will take all the stuffing out of us by this evening. We'll be more dead than alive. Let the ordinary ants obey this Instinct blindly if they want to, but we'll show IT, Malinin and I, that we're intelligent beings with minds of our own. And no mistake! Yes, but how are we going to show IT this when all the intelligence has gone from my mind and the only thing left in it is: 'Haul away! Drag away! Heave away! Go it, Barankin!'?" While I was hauling, dragging and heaving away, I was giving commands to myself quietly: "Think, Barankin! Think! Pull out the think-stop to spite this blessed Instinct! Don't obey it! Don't!"

At the words "don't obey", a plan immediately took shape in my head, or rather a plot, probably the only one of its kind in all the world. I decided to raise a revolt against this Instinct, a real genuine insurrection.

I was staggering along with a load of pine needles, when I suddenly pulled up short. I got up on my hind legs, straightened my weary back and shouted out loud right across the battlefield, like Peter the Great at Poltava:

"Malinin!" I commanded. "Chuck that rubbish down! Enough!"

"Enough? What's enough?" Kostya said apathetically.

"There's going to be a revolt! A plot!"
"A plot against whom?"
"Against I-N-S-T-I-N-C-T! A plot!"
"What's a plot?" Malinin asked.
"Well. I never!"

Kostya was beginning to forget the meaning of the simplest human words. Quickly I reminded him what the word "plot" stood for and explained what I meant. Kostya heard me out dully and asked in a dull voice:

"What plot?"

"What d'you mean—what? An ordinary plot! That is—not an ordinary plot, but a deadly one! Get me?"

"What does 'deadly' mean?" Kostya asked.

"Deadly means this—you and I will die rather than obey Instinct."

"And what does 'obey' mean? How's it not done?" Malinin said, looking at me sad-eyed and heaving a puzzled sigh.

"Quite simple. Now Instinct will load us up, you and me. D'you follow me? Load us up."

"Load us up—yes, I understand that," Kostya said.

"Good!" I said with relief. "Instinct will load us up, make us work, but we. you and me, will not obey. Not obey. Get me?"

"What d'you mean—not obey?"

"What I say. Like this. Look!"

I threw down the load of pine needles I was carrying on my back. At first Kostya looked at me as if I was a daft ant, then, after struggling with some thought or other, he lowered the birch leaf he was carrying to the ground. Then the two of us, relieved of our burdens, ran off the ant path and slipped away. Instinct, of course, wanted to make me pick up the needles, but I refused to obey it. Kostya Malinin stood next to me all tensed up, then suddenly started running round in circles like a dog trying to catch its own tail.

"What's bitten you?" I asked.

"I feel like going back and picking up that leaf," Malinin whispered.

"Don't give in! Don't obey it, not for anything in the world!"

"I'm not giving in."

"Good for you!" I praised Malinin, crawling into a bush of grass. "Come over here."

Breathing hard and overcoming the resistance of Instinct at every step, Kostya approached me with difficulty and clung to me with all six feet.

I pulled a birch leaf up over our heads like a blanket so that no one could see us.

"And now," I said in a feverish whisper, "now, Malinin, concentrate and repeat after me:

Not by night! Not by day!
Do I want! To be! An Ant!
Let me be human in every way,
For ever and a day!

Kostya gave a loud sob, then sighed, and instead of repeating the magic words, said:

"Oo, mummy!"

"What did you say?" I asked.

"Somebody's jerking my leg!"

Naturally, I thought it was Instinct trying to get him again. I raised the edge of the birch leaf and peeped out. No, it wasn't Instinct, it was some strange ant, which had grabbed hold of Kostya's hind leg and was pulling it with all his might.

EVENT THIRTY

SUDDEN RESCUE FROM SUDDEN PERIL

I thought I could get rid of that ant easily, but I was mistaken. He proved to be a very tough ant. He grabbed hold of one of my legs too.

Naturally, I warned him: "Lemme go! It'll be worse for you!" but he kept on pulling and pulling, then snatched the blanket off us—I mean the birch leaf. That got my goat, of course, and up I jumped, wild as anything. The old ant tapped us all over with his feelers like a doctor and said:

"What's the matter, are you ill?"

"No," I says. "Personally I'm quite well."

"Then what are you lying there for?"

"We're just having a rest."

"Why are you resting when everyone else is working?"

"Because today is Sunday," says I.

"What d'you mean—Sunday?" the old ant said blankly.

"A day of rest," I explained.

"Why, what for?"

"Very simple," I said. "Just an ordinary day of rest."

The news that two ants had gone to sleep at the height of a busy day spread through the ant-heap like wildfire. The event must have been something of a sensation, because all the ants gathered round to have a look at us. They formed a dense ring round Kostya and me in the clearing and began staring at us with all their eyes. Some of them climbed up flower stems and blades of grass to get a better view of us.

"What's a day of rest?" the pesky old ant went on questioning us.

"The day of rest is a day when nobody does any work," I started explaining to the assembled ants, but the more I explained the less they understood me. "Anyway," I concluded, "when we lived there we never used to do any work that day."

"Where is 't-h-e-r-e'?"

"There!" I waved a leg in the direction of the brick building. "In that brick ant-nest!—I mean that human brick nest. . . ." I got all mixed up and fell silent. Voices came from the crowd of ants:

"Suspicious, very suspicious!"

"Who are they?"

"This needs looking into."

"Don't look into nothing! Tear their legs off, that's all!"

"They're not us, they're strangers! They don't even speak the way we do!"

"We must look into this!"

While the old ants went into a huddle to decide what to do with us, the crowd continued to clamour. While the crowd was clamouring and the old ants conferring, I managed to whisper to Kostya:

"Malinin! Repeat the words after me while it isn't too late!"

Not by night! Not by day!
Do I want! To be! An ant!

But Malinin seemed to have gone deaf. He stared in horror at the old ants, who were conferring among themselves a little to one side, and didn't hear anything.

I fell silent too. What else could I do, seeing that by that time the old ants had finished conferring, and one of them came towards Kostya and me uttering the words: "Oyez! Oyez!"

"Attention, everybody!" he said. "Those two ants younder"—the old ant pointed a leg in our direction—"those two idlers, without waiting for the moon, stopped work with the sun at its highest. Without waiting for the sun to set they stopped work and laid them down to sleep, covering themselves up with a birch leaf. I am an old ant, but never have my ears heard or my eyes beheld anything as heinous as this in our ant-heap."

A threatening murmur came from the crowd.

"Listen, everybody!" the old ant repeated. "The Council of Elders has decided to sentence these two criminals to death!"

The crowd of ants roared their approval. Before Kostya could as much as let out a squeak, a dozen or so ants had thrown themselves upon him and me. Without saying a word they seized us by the legs, turned us over and bore us off.

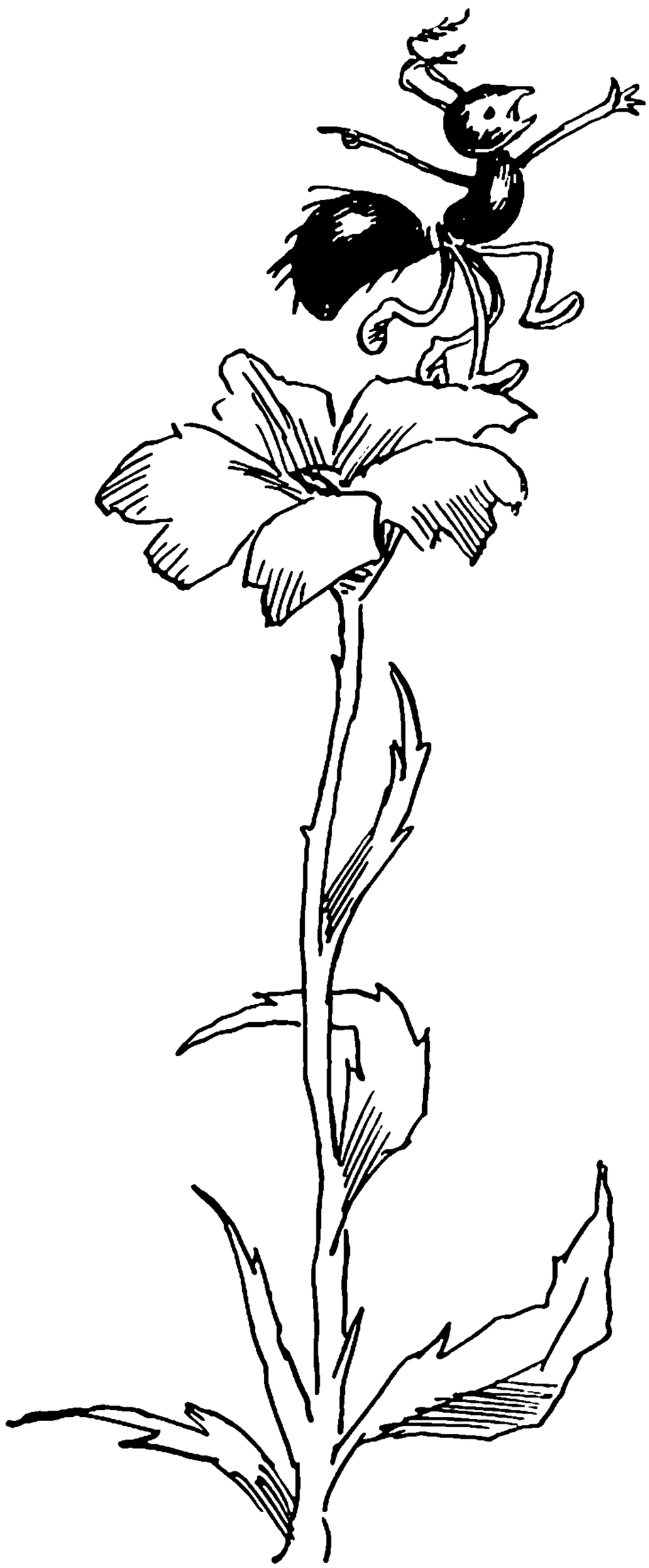
EVENT THIRTY-ONE

SO NOW YOU KNOW THE MYRMICKS, NOW YOU KNOW KOSTYA MALININ

There is no telling how this would have ended (I dare not even guess how it might have ended!) had not one of the ants, sitting on a tall flower, screamed:

"The Myrmicks are coming! The Myrmicks! The Myrmicks!"

At the word "Myrmicks" something queer happened to the ants who



were dragging Kostya and me away. They started trembling from head to foot and dropped us on to the ground. Then they started rushing about, waving their quivering feelers and wiggling their legs in a funny way. It looked very much like a savage war-dance. They tapped one another with their feelers, stood up on their hind legs, skipped about and assumed threatening attitudes, repeating one after the other the odd incomprehensible word which the ant sitting on the flower had uttered—"The Myrmicks! The Myrmicks!" Then all of them to a man dropped down on all fours—or rather all sixes—and made a mad dash for the grass bushes, forgetting all about Kostya and me. In less than a second every single one of those ants was hidden behind the trunk of a blade of grass. We were all alone in the deserted clearing.

I don't know why, but the sense of alarm that had seized the ants at the word "Myrmicks" was communicated to me too.

"Climb up after me! But don't make a noise! Quiet!" I said to Kostya Malinin, climbing up a near-by flower and surveying the terrain.

"Why quiet?" Malinin asked, climbing up after me.

"Just in case," I said, little suspecting that exactly a minute later this precaution of mine would be the means of saving Kostya's life and my own.

Having crawled up on to a leaf I was about to climb higher, when all of a sudden I saw below a black limping ant and all our "porters". They came out of the thick grass, moving backwards, then scattered, formed an extended line and stopped. Poking our heads over the edge of the leaf, Kostya and I watched the strange behaviour of the black ants. They stood stock-still, like soldiers preparing for action, and at that very minute some fifteen rust-coloured hulking ants came creeping out of the grass thickets. They came out and stopped.

What happened next was like a short news-reel about war.

The rust-coloured ants sprang at the black ones like so many unleashed dogs, snapping their huge jaws like pincers. Before you could blink an eye, the heads of the black ants started rolling over the ground like little balls. Only one black soldier survived—the lame ant. He must have been an experienced, hardened old soldier, judging by the way he fought off two of the attackers. He even managed to seize one ant's feeler, and the fellow, what with the pain, began to spin round on the ground like a top. But two other Myrmicks came to the rescue. They seized the lame ant by the hind legs and stretched him out on the ground.

The black ant shook himself, but another Myrmick sprang on to his back, and it was all over with the black ants.

The Myrmicks looked round with an air of triumph, twitching their feelers, then started to brush the dust of battle from off their sides.

I drew back from the edge of the leaf, feeling that Instinct, that very Instinct which Kostya and I had only recently curbed, was beginning to stir in me once more, and, what is more, it seemed to be sending me into battle to the assistance of our black ants. Another second and I would have sprung off the flower straight on to the backs of the Myrmicks, but I didn't jump off the flower. Instead I went and suppressed this Instinct in me as I did last time, because it would have been sheer stupidity on its part to send me into battle alone against a whole squad of Myrmicks. Besides, I knew that if I went for the Myrmicks, Instinct would make Kostya join in the fight, and when it came to a fight with the Myrmicks, Malinin didn't have a dog's chance—that much I knew definitely.

While I was struggling mentally with Instinct, the Myrmicks slipped away among the grass thickets, and the clearing was deserted again. Taking care not to make a noise, Kostya and I climbed to the top of the flower on tiptoes, and what we saw made us gasp.

The Myrmicks had succeeded, by that time, in surrounding the ant-heap. A pitched battle was raging in the clearings and amid the grass.

"It's war, Malinin!" I said.

"War, Barankin!" said Kostya Malinin.

Although there were fewer Myrmick soldiers on the field of battle, they made up for this in strength, brawn and experience. Slowly, step by step, they pressed the black ants back towards their nest. The clearings captured by the Myrmicks were strewn with the bodies of the black dead. They lay about in the most varied attitudes. The wounded twitched their limbs and feebly stirred their mandibles.

"The dirty skunks!" Malinin suddenly shouted, getting up on his hind legs. "The beasts! Hitting little ones!"

I caught hold of Malinin's leg, just in case, and dragged him away from the edge of our observation post.

The battle, meanwhile, was raging fiercer than ever. The combatants grabbed each other by the legs, tripped each other up, bit off feelers and caught each other by the throat with a bulldog grip.

"Forward, black-bellies! Give it to 'em!" Kostya yelled, struggling in my grip.

The black-bellies were really putting up a splendid fight. They had quickly succeeded in adjusting themselves to the Myrmicks' tactics and were now fighting like lions, making the best use of their numerical superiority. Five or six of them at a time would fling themselves upon a red-headed giant, stretch him out on the ground by his feelers and legs and give him the works.

"Well done! Give it to 'em hot!" I yelled at the top of my voice.

"Forward, black-bellies!" screamed Kostya.

"Hooray!" we shouted together.

The Myrmicks wavered and began to fall back.

I put a foot into my mouth and gave a piercing whistle. Kostya started dancing for joy on the flower, then all of a sudden he stopped dead.

"Look!" he said, pointing towards the ant-heap.

I looked down, and in the distance, beyond the hillside, I saw a huge force of Myrmicks hastening to the assistance of their fellows. And this just at a time when the blacks were forcing the enemy back all along the line. If this host of Myrmicks arrived in time it would go pretty hard with the blacks. So it would with Kostya and me, for that matter. We were black ants too. War was raging all around us, and here were we sitting back and watching the thing as if we were in a cinema. Had Kostya and I been humans at that moment instead of ants we could have been a great help to the blacks. As it was, we were good for nothing. Just a minute, though, couldn't we be useful too? If we assumed command of the black ants the whole picture might change right away. To be sure, they wanted to execute Kostya and me, but what of it? They had a good reason, anyway. On the whole they were not bad chaps. And they were putting up a splendid fight. The trouble was it was all Instinct and no sense. More guts than brains, as they say. They had no commander-in-chief, everyone was fighting on his own. If they had a commander now, they'd show those ginger Myrmicks what's what! What about our taking command, seriously? I'd be commander-in-chief and Kostya my chief of staff. No good—Kostya would be in a blue funk. He's no chief of staff. No, the best thing we could do was to turn back into humans again and drive those Myrmicks away from the ant-heap.

"Malinin!" I commanded, my eyes glued on the scene of battle. "Repeat after me, Malinin!"

Always and ever,
Let me be a Man!
Not by day, not by night,
Do I want to be an ant!

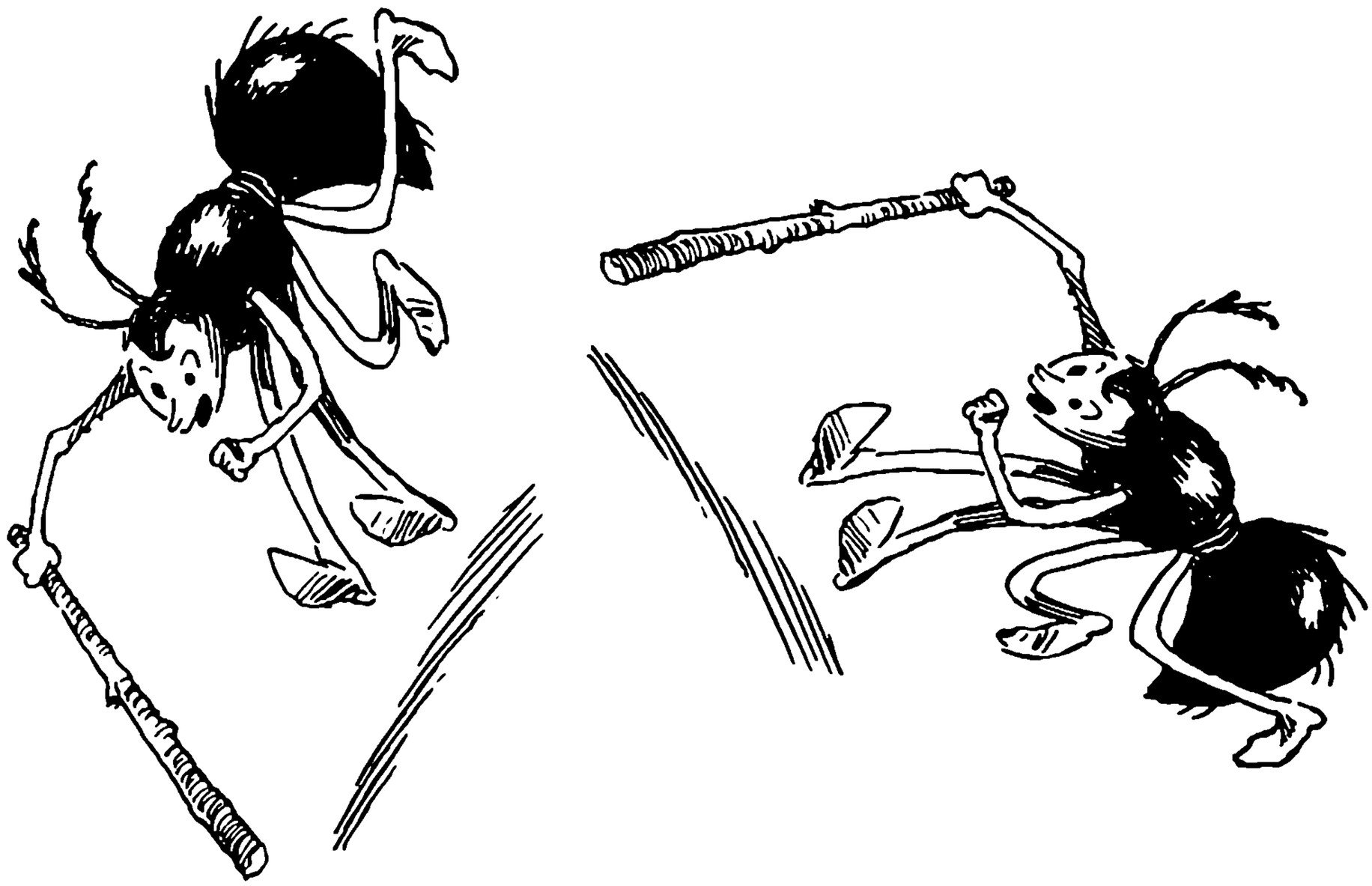
"Barankin, follow me! Death to the Myrmicks!" I heard Kostya Malinin's wild shriek behind my back.

I turned round, too late! With the words: "Barankin, follow me! Death to the Myrmicks!" Kostya Malinin had jumped off the flower, and snatching up a big stick as he ran along, he flung himself across the path of the advancing horde of ginger thugs to join up with the black ants.

EVENT THIRTY-TWO

WE ARE SURROUNDED

"Instinct!" the thought flashed through my mind. "Can it be that Instinct has called Kostya Malinin, and not only called, but has driven him into battle? No. I knew Kostya Malinin too well to think that. Kostya was none too brave, and no Instinct could ever make him join a fight. The simple explanation was the M-A-N had awakened in Kostya this time. Any man



would have the Man roused in him when he sees big bullies ill-treating little fellows, especially such nice hard-working fellows like those black-bellied ants. Yes, the M-A-N had awakened in Kostya. Who would have thought! Good for you, Malinin! He had gone and read my thoughts at a distance and rushed into the thick of the fray to help the black ants. Without a moment's hesitation, I followed suit. Jumping off the flower, I ran down the hill after Malinin at breakneck speed. From the hillside I could clearly see the great big army of the ginger ants swinging in to take the black ants in the rear. OUR MEN had to be warned of this at all cost, but Malinin, instead of joining up with the black ants, suddenly dashed aside

and made straight for the advancing host of Myrmicks all by his single self.

"Kostya!" I shouted as I ran along. "Malinin! Wait a minute! You're advancing the wrong side! What are you doing? You'll be killed! Kostya! Stop!"

But Kostya Malinin was deaf to my cries.

"Forward! At the enemy! Kill the fascists!" he screamed, waving his stick and putting on speed. He charged on like a galloping horse, leaving a cloud of dust behind him.

The army of Myrmicks, seeing a black ant cutting across its path, swung round and changed its course. Re-forming their ranks on the march, the Myrmicks held a brief conference among themselves and bore straight down on Kostya Malinin. In a moment they would clash, and Malinin's head, snapped off by those terrible jaws, would roll over the grass.... Forming a half circle round the swiftly advancing Malinin, the Myrmicks cut us off completely from our main forces.

Speed now would decide everything. In three tigerish bounds I overtook Kostya, seized his hind legs and dragged him away from the hillside towards a brook. We crossed the angry torrent on a birch leaf. I dragged Malinin ashore by the legs and hid him in the grass just when our pursuers came pouring down to the opposite bank. For greater safety I dragged Kostya further back into the depths of the forest and shook him off my back on to the ground.

Kostya Malinin sat in the grass with a wild dazed look in his eyes, as if he were still dashing on to meet the oncoming horde of Myrmicks.

"A fine soldier you are!" I said, wrenching the stick from Kostya's grip with difficulty. "I'll fetch you a crack over the nob—that'll teach you to poke your nose where you shouldn't! Why didn't you join up with our own forces, you chump!"

I would probably have fetched Kostya one on the nob, too, if my eye had not caught the shiny spine of a ginger Myrmick in the grass at that moment. I turned my head to see a red wicked-looking face glaring through the bushes, and ferociously working his huge jaws. Ginger ants appeared on the left and on the right. Whew! So they had managed to cross the brook, too, and surround Kostya and me from all sides in the bargain!

"Climb up a flower!" I whispered to Malinin. "Concentrate immediately and turn into a man this very moment!"

"What about you?"

"I'll cover your retreat. You can see yourself what a fix we are in. Come on!"

Kostya scrambled up the stalk and I followed him. The Myrmicks heard us and looked up. One of them got up on his hind legs the better to be able to see.

"Climb higher," I whispered to Kostya, "they've spotted us, the dirty skunks! Get right up on the flower and start transforming straight away."

While Malinin was climbing to the top of the flower the Myrmicks surrounded the stalk and followed us up, climbing one after the other in utter silence.

EVENT THIRTY-THREE

TEN BIG ONES AGAINST TWO LITTLE ONES AND THE FLYING WEB

"Ugh, you!" I shouted down, leaning over a leaf. "Ten big ones against two little ones—you ought to be ashamed of yourselves!"

The Myrmicks continued their climb in grim silence, going up the stalk higher and higher. Within about an inch of me they stopped and started gnashing their jaws. "I wonder whether Malinin will have time to turn into a man or not?" I thought, shifting the stick from one foot to another. "Oh, he won't manage a thing without me. . . ."

"Hi, ginger!" I shouted to the biggest of the Myrmicks. "I challenge you to a duel! Come on if you dare!"

The great big ginger thug, without saying a word, took a step forward and opened his jaws. I swung my stick back and fetched him a crack over the head with it as hard as I could. The Myrmick reeled, and without uttering a sound, slumped down on the ground. Quickly and silently, two other ginger ants took the place of the fallen soldier.

I was preparing to give them a warm reception when suddenly I heard Malinin's voice above me:

"Look out, Yuri! Another Myrmick's getting in behind you!"

I climbed up on to a leaf, knocked out all three Myrmicks with three blows and shouted:

"Malinin! Why don't you turn back into a man? Why don't you obey my order?"

"I'm not going to turn into anything without you!" Kostya hissed down at me.

"Yes you will!" I roared, beating off the attacking Myrmicks and crawling towards the middle of the flower.

I had reached the end of my tether. There was no way of escape. Below were the Myrmicks, above—the sky and in between—me and Kostya Malinin.

"What d'yer mean you're not going to transform?" I roared at Malinin. But just then a ginger head peeped out from behind the petal, rolling its eyes ferociously. "Transform this very minute, Malinin!" I said and gave the Myrmick a whack over the nob.

The Myrmick disappeared.

"I'll do it if we do it together!" Malinin said.

The head of a Myrmick reappeared out of the void on the other side.

"We won't have a time to do it together!" I said, running the Myrmick through with my stick, which I used as a rapier.

The Myrmick vanished.

"I'm not going to do it alone!" Malinin said.

I swung my foot back, cursing, and landed such a hard blow on the next Myrmick that my stick broke. The Myrmick toppled to the ground and I was left with a miserable little splinter in my hand instead of a stick.

Kostya and I retreated to the very centre of the daisy. We were now defenceless, and the Myrmicks seemed to have guessed as much. Four ginger heads popped up together on different sides. Kostya and I embraced.

"This is the end!" said Malinin. "Farewell, Barankin!"

I didn't even try to comfort my best pal, because it really did look as if we were done for. Below were the Myrmicks, above us the sky, and between Myrmicks and sky were Kostya and me. If only we could jump over on to the next flower! But it was too far away for that. We could have jumped off on to the ground, but that was just what the Myrmicks were waiting for. There was a swarm of them on the ground. To think how many times Kostya and I had had narrow escapes, cheating death by nothing short of a miracle! Surely, I'd find a way out again? Surely, Kostya and I were not doomed to die such a senseless death out here, on a daisy blossom, within a few paces of real human life? Would ALL, ALL that we had learned, lived through and experienced be wasted in vain?

"Come on, Malinin! We'll show those Myrmicks how real boys die!"

I got up on my hind legs to meet the Myrmicks and bumped my head against a cobweb drawn taught by the wind. It had caught in one of the petals and was dangling over the flower like a thread from a magic carpet.

"Malinin!" I yelled, and this time Malinin twigged at once.

Jaws, each of them like a trap, snapped at the empty air

He scuttled up the cobweb with me following him. It remained now to bite off the thread. I did so. The cobweb flew away—flew away just as four Myrmicks launched a simultaneous attack upon us from all sides. One of the Myrmicks made a snap at my head, but only grazed my leg with his jaws. Four jaws, each of them like a trap, snapped at the empty air. The tiny thread of gossamer—our magic carpet—carried us farther and farther away from the flower towards the ant-heap. I looked down and could not believe my eyes. While Malinin and I had been engaged in mortal combat with superior forces of the enemy, the black ants had succeeded in routing the Myrmicks and had returned to their occupations.

The war had ended as suddenly as it had begun, and only the wounded ants and the scavengers, who were removing the dead bodies farther away from the ant-heap, remained as evidence of the battle that had raged on these fields only a few minutes ago, the fiercest battle within the ken of Kostya Malinin and me.

Not by night, not by day,
Do I want to be an ant!

I sang out at the top of my voice,

Always and ever,—

Kostya Malinin joined in—

Let me be a Man!

Just then something whistled hideously behind my back. A blast of air struck me, tore me off the gossamer thread and sent me flying head over heels. While I was doing somersaults in the air I noticed that a gigantic martin, in full flight, had pecked Kostya Malinin off the gossamer thread and shot up into the sky.

When I realised what had happened, I felt faint, swooned away and dropped senseless on to the ground.

PART FIVE

BE A MAN, BARANKIN!

EVENT THIRTY-FOUR

A VOICE "FROM THE GRAVE"

I don't know how long I lay unconscious in the grass—it must have been a long time, but when I did come to myself I still continued to lie there dead to the world. Everything Kostya and I had lived through passed before my eyes again in topsy-turvy sequence. I tried opening my eyes, but it was no use—either it was night all round me or else I had gone blind. So then I started thinking of Kostya. Kostya was dead, but in my mind he was as alive as alive can be. Memory, though only for a short time, revived the image of my friend, and I felt a bit better. Couldn't that accursed martin have pecked *me* up instead! After all, it was *me* who had got Kostya into this mess, and here I was safe and sound, while Kostya was dead, dying the death of an ant before he had managed to turn back into a man. At first the thought seemed right to me, but on second thought it struck me as being wrong. What did I mean by saying that Kostya had died the death of an ant before he had managed to turn into a man? Why, Kostya would always remain a Man to me, no matter what he turned himself into. It was as a Man that he had rushed to the aid of the ants! And he had not left me in the lurch either! He had not wanted to turn into anything without me! And he had not funked in the face of the Myrmicks! Why, if Kuzyakina saw with her own eyes how brave Kostya Malinin had been in the war, she would devote the whole issue of the wall newspaper to him, she would, and Alik Novikov, if he were an ant reporter, would have used up a whole film on him, he would. Kostya Malinin all THAT time had been a Man and had died like a Man. And there was no need to whisper any magic words to him, there was no need for him to wish to transform himself into a man, because he had done that a long time ago! Yes! Kostya Malinin had definitely turned into a Man, but I? Of course, it was difficult to be one's own judge, it was difficult for me to say whether I had acted as a Man towards Kostya Malinin

or not. Maybe an ant I had been and an ant I had remained? Maybe.... Honestly, though, I had done my level best to act the Man. How many times I had nearly had my head snapped off by those Myrmicks on account of Kostya Malinin. Luckily the last one had just missed me and gashed my leg instead—it still hurt.

Gently, with my foreleg, I stroked the leg the Myrmick had bitten, and gave a start. This time I wasn't stroking an ant leg with an ant leg, but a human leg with a human hand. At least, so it seemed to me. So then I opened my eyes and what I saw was really an ordinary boy's leg. It was my own leg, and only the clotted blood on the scratched spot was there to remind me that it has recently been an ant's leg. And my arms now were like arms, and my head.... My head too was what and where it should be. To come fully to myself, I lay in the grass a bit, then sat up, then stood up, dusted my trousers, put my hands in my pockets and walked off towards the house like a human being. I walked with my eyes down, looking at my feet, without glancing to the side.

My head buzzed and my body ached all over as if I had been beaten with sticks. My leg, which the Myrmick had bitten, smarted terribly and gave me a pain every time I stepped on it. Five or six times I stumbled into passers-by, and every time they said to me: "Look where you're going, boy!"—as if I was looking anywhere else!

I don't remember how I got to our yard, because I was walking all the way as if in a dream, and I only came to myself when I bumped into the gate. I kicked it open without taking my hands out of my pockets, went over to the bench and sat down on it. Everything in the yard was the same as before. Gay companies of sparrows kept darting off the branches of the acacia, butterflies fluttered about over the flowerbed, and black ants ran about on the bench. Everything was in its proper place. Only Kostya Malinin was missing. He was not there and he never would be, never. I wasn't there myself for that matter—I mean, I was there, but it wasn't the old me. I was sitting on the bench, but I was

not myself. It seemed to me all the time as if I had just returned from a very long and dangerous voyage on which I had set out years and years ago with my friend Kostya Malinin. We had set out together, and I had come back alone. And now all my life I'd be alone, all alone. I buried my face in my hands and started blubbering—for the first time in my life. Tears streamed down my face, down my hands, down my neck and even down my belly. I sat blubbering, and the tears flowed and flowed. I even wondered where a man got all those tears from. On the other hand, if a fellow had never cried in his life, he must have accumulated a lot of the stuff inside him.

"Barankin! What's this—you've turned on the waterworks?" all of a sudden, from somewhere above, I heard Kostya Malinin's voice.

EVENT THIRTY-FIVE

WE EXIST!

"Kostya," I said, shutting off the flood of tears. "Is that you, Kostya?"

"It's me," the voice of Kostya Malinin answered from above. It was a far-away muffled voice, as if coming from the sky.

"So you're . . . t-h-e-r-e already?"

"What d'you mean t-h-e-r-e?"

"Well, wherever it is—the next world."

"The next world? What are you jabbering about? I'm here on the fence."

"You needn't pull my leg, Malinin. As if I didn't see that martin gobble you up. How can you be sitting on a fence if he gobbled you up?"

"Who did the martin gobble up? Me? He gobbled *you* up, not me. I saw it with my own eyes."

"And I tell you he gobbled *you* up!"

"How could he have gobbled me up if I'm sitting here on this fence, safe and sound? Open your eyes and see for yourself."

" 'Open your eyes'! And what if I'm afraid to open 'em?"

"What are you afraid of?"

"I'm afraid to open them and find that you don't exist," I said and started off another flood of tears.

"All right," Kostya Malinin's voice spoke down. "I'll show you in a minute whether I exist or not."

There was a swishy sound and then something jumped down on to my shoulders.

I fell down and opened my eyes. And there was Kostya, as large as life and even bigger. He sat astride me, pounding me with his fists and saying:

"Well, do I exist or do I not? Do I exist or do I not?"

"You exist!" I yelled, and we rolled over together on the grass, which was covered with yellow leaves. "Kostya Malinin, of the Malinin family exists! Hooray! Hooray!"

"So we e-x-i-s-t?"

"We e-x-i-s-t!"

"And how do we exist?"

"As people!"

"As h-u-m-a-n-s!"

"Hooray!" we shouted for joy and began to hug each other.

"Wait a minute!" I said to Kostya. "Let me have a look at you."

"Don't be silly, Yuri!" laughed Kostya. "Haven't you ever seen me before?"

"No," I said. "I never saw you before, and you never saw me properly either. In fact, I never saw myself before, and you never saw yourself either."

We started looking at each other in silence. Kostya looked at me and I looked at Kostya, and I didn't just look, but studied him from head to foot, examined him as if he were a stunning miracle of Nature. For quite a time, for instance, I stared at Kostya's hands, which were covered with the scars of battle. Previously, I would never have taken any notice of my own or other people's hands. They were just hands as hands go. But now I couldn't tear my eyes away from them. My word! These were not ant legs for you, or butterfly wings! I don't suppose you ever noticed your hands either? Some boys do, though, but not girls—they're too busy looking at their faces.

And the head! I never used to take much notice of my head before either. A head as heads go. On your shoulders—where it should be. You ram your cap down over it. Sometimes it's up in the clouds. But now, now.... After all I've been through, you don't have to tell me that if a person's hands are a miracle, then his h-e-a-d is the most miraculous miracle of miracles. Even Venka Smirnov's head is a miracle. But he doesn't know it yet, and what's more he doesn't know how to make proper use of that miracle. I daresay there are lots of people like Venka in the world. America has its Venka, I'm sure, and so does France, so does England. Everywhere there are boys who don't think of anything, and there are also boys who think what they should not be thinking. Take Kostya Malinin and me, for instance. Now, at least, I know the reason for this—it's because not all boys and girls know how wonderfully interesting it is to

think in general, especially to think of what you should be thinking. To think and to use your head! And not just anyhow, mind you, not instinctively, so to say, ant fashion, but thinking the real way, the h-u-m-a-n way!

I don't know how much longer we would have sat there on the grass, Kostya and I, thinking the same things. . . .

Kostya didn't tell me anything, of course, but I'll take my oath that I felt, that I heard—yes, heard—Kostya thinking the same things as I did, word for word, but in the middle of our thoughts something jumped off the tree on to my back—something furry that dug its nails so painfully into my ant-bitten and sparrow-pecked body that I all but cried out.

"Mooska!" Kostya Malinin cried, delighted.

It was Mooska, of course, our cat Mooska who had twice tried to eat me up in my sparrowhood.

"Aha, Mooska!" I shouted, tearing her off my back. "I'm going to settle accounts with you now for EVERYTHING! Mooska!" I was about to seize her by the ear, but Kostya Malinin restrained me.

"Never mind that, Barankin," Kostya said. "Let bygones be bygones, seeing that everything has ended so happily."

And Kostya was so glad that everything had ended so happily, so wonderfully, I should say, that he started hugging me again with all his might. Then, for sheer joy, I started hugging the garden bench, the same bench we had been sitting on t-h-a-t t-i-m-e, and then I hugged the fence that stood next to the birch-tree, and then both of us together hugged the birch-tree under which stood the bench on which the idea first came to my mind that I was tired of being a man. . . .

"I've been looking for them all over the town, and here they are cuddling trees!" cried Misha Yakovlev, suddenly flying into the yard on his bike with Alik sitting behind him.

And then Zina Fokina, followed by Era Kuzyakina and all the rest, came trooping into the yard.

"Misha!" Kostya and I shouted in one voice, rushing at Yakovlev from two sides and throwing our arms round him.

Misha was so surprised he let go the handle-bars and we all fell in a heap. Kostya and I continued to hug and kiss Misha Yakovlev and Alik Novikov.

"What's the matter with you, boys? Have you gone crazy? We saw each other only yesterday! You're like a couple of girls, really!" Alik and Misha cried, fighting us off.

"Alik and Misha!" Kostya Malinin said with tears in his eyes, planting a kiss on Yakovlev's ear. "You've got no idea what happened here when you were away!"

"What happened? Where?" Alik pricked up his ears.

"Nothing happened, he's just kidding," I put in quickly, giving Kostya Malinin a look that silenced him at once.

Meanwhile the girls of our class crowded round us.

"We've been looking for them all over the place, and here they are lolling about in the grass!" Era Kuzyakina said.

"Barankin!" said Zina Fokina. "Do you intend to do your lessons or not?"

"Zina, darling!" I said. "Zina, darling," I repeated. "If you knew h-o-w Kostya and I intend to do o-u-r l-e-s-s-o-n-s!"

"And work too!" Kostya said, taking a spade out of Kuzyakina's hands.

I took a spade from Zina Fokina.

"Barankin!" said Era. "Why do you and Kostya look dotty? And act dotty, too," she added.

"Because! Because!" I shouted.

"Come along," Misha said. "We've wasted enough time."

"Just a minute!" I said. "Friends, class-mates! I want to tell you all that the word MAN HAS A RING!"

"Barankin!" said Era. "You're not quoting right. It should be: 'MAN—How proud the word rings!' "*

"Never mind about that, Era!" I said. "We know better than you do now what sort of a ring the word M-a-n has. Isn't that so, Malinin!"

"You bet, Barankin!"

Kostya and I put our arms round Misha from two sides and ran upstairs.

On the landing I suddenly ran into Venka Smirnov. Remember him? The one who had taken a shot at Kostya and me with his slingshot when we were sparrows. And when we were butterflies he had wanted to tear our wings off. And when we were ants he had smashed up our ant home.

"Hullo!" Venka said, screwing up an eye, and skipping downstairs two steps at a time.

I gripped him by his shirt and pulled him up.

"Whassermatter?" Venka said.

"This!" I said, pulling him towards me and giving him a cuff on the ear.

"What for?" Venka said.

"That'll teach you to shoot at me with your slingshot!"

* A quotation from Maxim Gorky's play *The Lower Depths* (Act IV).—*Tr.*

"When did I shoot at you with my slingshot?"

"When I was sitting on that branch out there," I said, pointing through the window at the poplar, from which Venka had very nearly knocked us off with his catapult.

"When were you sitting on that branch? You're talking through your neck, Barankin!"

"Oh, talking through my neck, am I? What about the two sparrows sitting in that poplar—don't you remember?"

Venka screwed up his eye, casting about in his mind for an answer.

"And this one's for the butterflies! That'll teach you to tear our—I mean their—wings off! And this is for the ants, for digging your spade into their home."

I gave Venka a couple of extra cuffs for good measure, pulled the slingshot with the telescopic sight out of his pocket, broke it and ran upstairs to join Misha and Kostya.

"Barankin!" Venka's voice came from down below.

"What do you want?"

"I didn't understand a thing all the same!"

"When you become a M-a-n you'll u-n-d-e-r-s-t-a-n-d e-v-e-r-y-t-h-i-n-g!" I shouted down over the banisters.

EVENT THIRTY-SIX

ALWAYS AND EVER TO BE A MAN!

That day we did our lessons with Yakovlev for at least four hours running. When Misha, at the height of the lesson, asked us: "Aren't you tired, boys? Maybe you'd like to have a rest?"—Kostya and I shouted at him in one voice: "No, no! We're not a bit tired! Who said a rest? No shirking, now, Yakovlev!" "I'm not shirking!" said the astonished Misha, and began explaining to us the next sum, then he went over the whole thing again with us, and then explained another sum to us, then put us through a little examination, then he laid his head on the table and said in a hoarse voice that he couldn't do any more lessons with us because he had strained his voice and was completely done up.

So then we took spades and went with Misha to the garden to plant trees. Manual labour is the best form of relaxation after mental effort.

When we ran out in the yard the first person we saw was Alik. He had been sitting on the bench all that time, keeping a watch on us in case we ran away. What a funny chap! When he heard that we were going to the

garden to work of our own free will, his eyes grew round and he ran after us clicking away with his camera. In the garden all the planting was done already, so we started to water the trees, and Alik stared at us again and clicked away with his camera. Then we went back to my place again and did our school work until Misha and Kostya were completely fagged out.

When Yakovlev and Malinin had gone home, I continued to sit over my schoolbooks, working by myself. I worked until I fell asleep at the table. When I woke up the next morning I found myself in bed—Dad must have carried me there. But I woke up myself, woke up very early, when everybody was still asleep. I made the bed m-y-s-e-l-f, quietly had my breakfast, collected my schoolbooks, tiptoed out of the house and ran off to school. That day I had to be the first, I simply h-a-d to be the f-i-r-s-t in school t-h-a-t d-a-y!

And so I was. I came to school when all my class-mates were still fast asleep in their beds—all of them, Zina Fokina, and Misha Yakovlev, and Alik Novikov, and Kostya Malinin—this one must have been snoring like a bull! I was the only one of our class who was not asleep. Not only was I not sleeping, but I was at school a full two hours before lessons started. Probably no pupil in the world had ever come to school so early. Imagine my surprise when I saw a figure stealing towards the school entrance by the opposite path behind the lilac bushes. I stopped. The figure stopped too. I took three steps towards the school, and the figure took three steps. I began to creep towards the door, and so did the figure. I poked my head out from behind a bush, and the figure stuck his head out too. We stood there for a long time looking at each other, and then I got fed up.

"Malinin!" I said.

"Well?"

"What are you doing at school so early?"

"And what are you doing?"

"Me, oh, j-u-s-t l-i-k-e t-h-a-t. . . . And you?"

Me, too, j-u-s-t l-i-k-e t-h-a-t. . . ."

"I see!" we both said together.

Quietly, taking care not to make a noise, Kostya and I mounted the stone steps together, pressed our faces to the cold dewy glass of the door, and waited silently to be let into o-u-r s-c-h-o-l.

We stood there in silence, not looking at each other, simply stood there and waited, little suspecting that exactly in two hours the most surprising events would take place, events that would astound the whole class, the whole school. . . .

First, exactly in two hours ten minutes Nina Nikolayevna would call me to the blackboard, and I would tell her everything I knew about the life of butterflies. And Nina Nikolayevna would say: "Yuri Barankin! You know the life of butterflies very well. Sit down. Good boy! When you were answering your lesson I even thought for a moment that wings had grown behind your back!" After those words the whole class would rock with laughter, while Kostya and I would not even smile, and would sit at our desk as grave as grave can be.

Second, in two days' time Kostya Malinin and I would get our bad marks for geometry changed to good marks.

Third, in three days' time, Zina Fokina would proclaim for all to hear that Kostya and I were the victims of some mysterious disease, but that would soon pass.

Fourth, a few days after that Zina Fokina will suddenly stop telling me in and out of season: "Barankin, be a man, Barankin!"

Fifth, in about a fortnight's time Father, as usual, will check my report card, and for the first time in his life he will have nothing to say and will simply lift a shoulder in surprise and exchange glances with Mother.

Sixth, exactly in a month our Headmaster—

But it's a bit too early to speak of that just now. It will only happen in a month's time, whereas now only ten minutes have gone by, ten minutes since Kostya and I have been standing at the school doors, just standing and waiting for them to open the doors and let us into the school, into o-u-r s-c-h-o-o-l.

TO THE READER

Progress Publishers would be glad to have your opinion on this book, its translation and design and any suggestions you may have for future publications.

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